神様のメモ帳8
杉井 光
イラスト❄岸田メル
電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations

神様のメモ帳8

年末年始、四代目を悩ませていたのは頻発する雀荘荒らしだった。なぜか麻雀打ちとして駆り出された僕は、雀荘で奇妙な男と出逢う。雛村玄一郎――なんと四代目の父親！

緊迫する親子勝負の裏で、雀荘荒らしをはじめ、無関係に見えたいくつもの事件が結びついていき、やがてよみがえるのは一年前のあの悪夢。

「あの事件をもう一度、完膚無きまでに終わらせるんだ」

アリスが、テツ先輩と四代目が、そして彩夏までもが、赤い悪夢の残り滓に突き動かされて走り出す――加速するニートティーン・ストーリー、第8弾！

す-9-16

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杉井 光（すぎい ひかる）

1978年、東京生まれ。生まれてはじめてフードプロセッサを購入し、猫のようになんでもみじん切りやペーストにしまくる日々。ふと「グーニーズ」の人間ミキサーの場面を思い出して我に返る。でもレバーペースト美味しいです。気にしないで食べてます。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女 巻ノ一〜三
神様のメモ帳1〜8
さよならピアノソナタ1〜4
さよならピアノソナタ encore pieces

イラスト：岸田メル（きしだ）

1983年生まれ、イラストレーター。主な仕事に、ライトノベルの挿絵や、ゲーム、アニメのキャラクターデザインなど。趣味はネット遠隔です！　引きこもってます！
ホームページはhttp://maigo.jp/

カバー／加藤製版印刷

神様のメモ帳8
杉井 光
イラスト❄岸田メル

Characters

ミンさん

ニート探偵事務所があるビルの1階に店を構えるラーメンはなまる店主。アリスはじめニート探偵団の面々を生温かい目で見守っている。

彩夏

ナルミのクラスメイト。とある事件で重傷を負い、記憶を失ったものの生還を果たす。明るく素直な性格だが、どこかすれてるところも。

平坂組 Hirasaka-gumi

いまどき任侠を気取る不良少年グループ。しかしその実力は侮れない。

四代目

平坂組リーダー。冷徹な性格だが、趣味特技が手芸という隠れた一面も。ナルミと義兄弟の杯を交わしている。

電柱

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその1。組の中では縦幅最大。

岩男

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその2。組の中では横幅最大。

アリス Alice

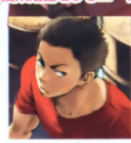
ひきこもりの自称(ニート探偵)。PCとぬいぐるみで溢れた自室で、ネットを駆使して真実を暴きだす。普段はいつもパジャマを着て、栄養の大半をドクターペッパーから摂取している。

藤島 鳴海 Narumi

本作の主人公。転校を繰り返し人付き合いを避けるようになっていたが、とある事件をきっかけにアリスの助手となる。なにごとにもやる気がなさげなニート予備軍だが、ロハ丁だけは一人前。

ニート探偵団 NEET Detectives

アリスのもとで合法・非合法を問わず捜索活動をするニートな野郎ども。



テツ先輩

元ボクサーで荒事にたけた武闘派。その一方、パチスロや競馬などに精を出すギャンブル狂。

ヒロさん

女のもとを渡り歩くヒモ。卓越した話術でたくみに情報を引き出す(ただし対女子限定)。

少佐

童顔で小学生にも見えかねない外見をしているが、盗聴・盗撮・爆発物のエキスパート。

Designed by Toru Suzuki

Alice with Mogg adect

Alice on her
Comfortable Bed

It's said that they aren't clinging onto the bamboo poles, but gliding along them. In any case, living on and doing something wouldn't be as bad as how it was at that moment.

Dragonflies are dragonflies. Every year, they merely glide from the North end of the Street to the South, down the lined bamboo poles

'The Blooming Flowers in the Underpass' Irokawa Butai

Chapter 1

I have a blood-related older sister, and an older brother not related by blood. If I told them that, most people would then conclude something like "I see, so your sister is married", but my sister is actually unmarried. In fact, my sister and my brother are not related whatsoever. That man and I ended up becoming sworn brothers through a ritual based on yakuza movies.

It's been a little more than a year since that autumn when I moved to this city. Back then I was just an inconsiderate brat, but I learned many things during all this time. For example, that there are bonds much more stronger than bonds merely formed by blood, but that doesn't mean blood ties are weak, either.

My mother died a long time ago and my father almost never comes home, so I don't quite understand what it means to have a family. When I asked Alice about it, she replied with her usual calm tone:

"Family is the smallest, most unconditional reciprocal union in which everything can be forgiven. For this reason, things like hiding a criminal or destroying the evidence of their crime stops being a sin in their eyes. Something similar to an unscrupulous debt in an unwritten contract, don't you think so?"

What a nonsensical answer, really. On second thought, she had left her family behind and ran away from home, so a sarcastic reply on her part was to be expected. However, she then laughed softly and added, with distant eyes:

"It's this world's most beautiful illusion."

*

In an old building five stories tall next to an alley, pretty far away

from the station, there's a ramen shop signaled with a red sign. That place, Ramen Hanamaru, is where we always hang out. The owner is Min-san, a young woman with a 'nice big sister' spirit. I got to know that place because of a classmate named Ayaka, who works there part-time. The only 'good citizens' of the gang are those two, while the rest are NEETs who don't work or study.

"I failed at the Arima Kinen and the Tokyo Daishouten... I lost around 100.000..." Squatting on the concrete floor in front of the backdoor with a resigned epression was Tetsu-senpai, the ex-boxer who had became a good-for-nothing gambling addict and had ended the year by wasting a huge amount of money.

"Narumi, you got a lot of New Year money, right?", Tetsu-senpai spoke to me. "Lend me some."

"I don't want to. And I didn't receive New Year money from anyone in the first place.", I replied while eating my late lunch. Senpai looked surprised, so I went on: "If I had parents or relatives to be with I wouldn't be here the second day of the year."

"Well, I'm *so* sorry that you have to be in this place, huh. You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Upon hearing that voice coming from the kitchen, I got startled without letting go of the bowl. The woman with a ponytail opened the back door.

"Ahh, no, uhm, I didn't mean that--"

"Here, Tetsu, your ramen's ready." Min-san quickly turned her gaze away from Tetsu-senpai to glare at me while giving him a ramen bowl with just soup and noodles, a menu so poor that one could almost cry.

"I can't really say much, but, you guys really don't have parents or relatives to spend time with? Would they go to your funeral if you died? Tetsu, if you're not careful enough you could end up without anyone to tend your grave.", Min-san said, folding her arms and leaning against the door. Tetsu-senpai slurped some soup and shrugged.

"It's not like I care about what happens to me after I die. More important than that, the New Year money--"

"Talk when you can pay your tab, you good-for-nothing!", Min-san pulled Tetsu-senpai's ear.

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow!"

She was wearing a tank top and he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt without a sense of the season. I tilted my head and looked up at the winter sky, cloudless regardless of the cold weather. It didn't feel like New Year at all.

"Happy New Year!"

A refreshing voice was heard and a tall figure approached from the alley. That young man dressed with a cashmere coat and a long beige scarf so refinedly combined that it made him look like a model got closer to the back door. Hiro-san is one of the NEETs that always hang out on that alley. With his handsome appearance and rhetorical abilities, he lives as a gigolo who tricks and leeches off women.

"Oh? Narumi-kun's here too. Don't you spend time with your family to receive New Year money and all that?"

You too? I gave him the same explanation I had given to Tetsu-senpai.

"Aah, I see.", he made an apologetic face for an instant, but his smile quickly returned. "Then, this is from me." To my surprise, he handed me a 10.000 yen bill.

"Hiro, me too! I want money too!"

"Tetsu, you're the same age as me, aren't you?"

"No, my birthday's three months later, so I'm younger! Give me money!"

Min-san smacked Tetsu-senpai and turned to see Hiro-san.

"Hiro, being a NEET gigolo, are you in position to give money to others?"

"Well, yes. I received quite a lot of money from the ladies. For example, there was this time when we went on a holiday overseas without her husband knowing or--" Hiro-san was also smacked by Min-san. With a bump on their heads each, they kept eating their first ramen of the year.

"We do the same every year..."

"It's fine that way, isn't it? We have nowhere else to go. When you try to be a good son, your parents are already gone."

"Do you want to be a good son, Hiro?"

"No, not at all."

Both Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san laughed. I never asked much about their family situations, but apparently Hiro-san didn't grow up on easy circumstances. In the end, we looked like a parentless bunch. Now that I remembered, Min-san doesn't have a mother either, and Ayaka's parents are divorced.

"What's with you, Narumi? What a gloomy face. If you're not gonna eat that I will.", Tetsu-senpai pointed at the bowl on my knees. I had left my chopsticks still, with the noodles extended.

"N-no, I'm still eating."

"Coming here on the second day of the year, it seems like he's going to completely become one of us. How terrible, Narumi-kun." Hiro-san's teasing words were quite cruel. Tetsu-senpai knitted his brows.

"He's not *going to* be one of us. It's too late for him already."

"Well, that's true."

I choked with the soup in my throat.

"I-it's not that!", after wiping my chin and mouth with a napkin, I kept talking. "I was just thinking that none of us has parents... Quite

the coincidence, isn't it?"

Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai stopped eating and looked at each other. The first one to open his moth was senpai.

"...Not a coincidence, probably."

"Eh? Ehm...?"

What does that mean? Something like "Birds of a feather flock together?" NEETs end up together? Please, no. I'm still a high school student. My grades are pretty bad, but I still go to class.

"It's not a coincidence.", Hiro nodded. "If you don't have a family, you have free time, don't you? And if you have free time, you end up hanging out here 24/7."

True. The main reason why I was in this place in the middle of the New Year celebrations was because I have a lot of time to kill.

Tetsu-senpai suddenly spoke:

"Yondaime does have his parents, doesn't he?"

"Ahh, yes, I think so.", Hiro-san replied.

Yondaime is that person who ended up doing the sake ceremony with me by a twist of fate, becoming my sworn brother. His weird nickname was given to him because he's the son of a family who manages a stall-keepers business in Kansai.

"His parents are in Kansai, so he doesn't see them much, does he?"

"Is he in touch with them?"

I couldn't imagine Yondaime being in contact with his family, since I remember hearing that he had ran away to Tokyo because he didn't want to inherit his family's business.

"I wonder how Yondaime's old man looks like."

"I picture him looking like Aikawa Show."

"Ahh, you think so, Hiro? I imagine him with a more stern look, like Takakura Ken or something like that."

Both of them then started to picture him like different actors, manga characters, Dragon Quest Monsters (Why?), etc. I would get to meet that person later on, and he would be completely different to any of their comparisons.

After finishing my ramen and enduring Tetsu-senpai being annoying with his "Give me cash!" again, I quickly went up the emergency stairs. In the third floor of the same building of the ramen shop there was a room with a sign that read "NEET Detective Office", my employer's shelter.

"Happy New Year..."

I opened the door and greeted in a small voice as I entered. It was colder inside the room than outside.

"What is there to be happy about? Here and there, the new year just brings inconveniences."

I heard the sulky voice of the little girl. Across the kitchenette and the narrow corridor a room with three sides of the wall covered with monitors, computers and cables could be seen; such a cybernetic room. Sitting on a bed in the middle was the girl with long and splendid black honey-colored hair that flowed like a river. She was wearing light-blue pajamas with teddy bear patterns, her stocking-covered legs were worryingly thin and her skin was really pale. No matter how you looked at her, her appearance was worrisome. Shionji Yuuko--AKA Alice. The detective who employes me.

"Observe, Moggadeet's ear has come unstitched."

With teary eyes, Alice thrust her big teddy bear against me. Some thread was hanging from its little ear.

"This happened because I hug him too tightly every day even when I'm sleeping! I wanted to ask Yondaime to repair it but he's busy with the new year and he doesn't answer the phone. Even though

he usually answers quickly..."

I was about to tell her that she could just leave the teddy bear alone for one or two days, but I decided not to say anything. That teddy bear with a strange name was her favorite, and apparently she couldn't sleep if she wasn't hugging it.

"Uhmm... Then, how about I take his place?"

When I said that, Alice blushed so hard that she looked like a habanero pepper.

"W-w-what are you saying-? Why would I hug you to sleep!? I could never do such a shameless thing--"

"That's not what I meant. I meant to say if you would like me to fix it."

Alice's face was practically emitting steam.

"...You should have said that from the start!"

"You're the one who misunderstood!"

Alice puffed her reddened cheeks and turned to the monitor.

"Can you even sew? You look so clumsy that it wouldn't surprise me if you weren't even capable of tying your own shoelaces. More importantly, there's no more Dr Pepper left."

On the floor at her feet there was a pyramid of purplish-red 350 ml. cans. She doesn't eat properly, and the base of her eccentric diet is actually this carbonated drink. Sadly, my main task as a detective's assistant is taking care of her daily dose of Dokupe.

"Go buy two packs at the convenience store later, since the liquor store is closed and it's not delivering either. I don't see what's so special about the New Year. Isn't just the year changing?"

"Don't you do anything typical of the New Year?", I asked. "Like, visiting the shrine, or eating typical foods, or going back to your parents' house... Ahh, no, I'm sorry. That was a stupid question."

Alice glared at me and let out a childish "hmph", then she turned back to the keyboard once again.

"The first two would imply that I return to the Shionji house anyway and that's not likely, even if the house is reduced to ashes and their affiliated business all fall into bankruptcy."

I tilted my head at her tone of voice, as sharp and cold as an icicle.

For some reason, around five years ago, Alice ran away from home. I don't know her exact age, but she looks really young now; five years ago her age probably had a single digit. That's not normal. Because of that, she spends her days shut away in her room, with countless security cameras installed in the whole building out of fear of someone coming to get her. What could have possibly happen in her parents' house? What kind of person are her parents? Are they alive and in good health? I'd like to ask her all these questions, but it's better if I don't. It must be a delicate situation.

My cellphone's ringtone broke the silence. Upon looking at the screen, I noticed it was a call from Yondaime.

"Happy New Ye--"

'Don't bother with the greeting.', Yondaime sharply said on the other side of the line. 'I have a job for you. It's urgent, so come right away. Do you know where the mahjong parlor Tenhou Club is?'

"Uh-, ah, yes."

'It's about what I told you about at the end of the year.'

*

Mahjong parlors are highly active during the last days of the year and the New Year. It's because of the same reason we hang out at Hanamaru: People with free time. Since there are lots of people

who like gambling and don't give a damn about spending New Year with their families, mahjong and pachinko parlors become packed with people.

That mahjong parlor called Tenhou Club is at Shinjuku's Kabuki-cho and it's one of the most popular and successful parlors of the neighborhood. On the second day of the year, Kabuki-cho's streets were full of noisy barkers promoting bars and host clubs seemingly having a shouting contest. After bumping into lots of passers-by because I was carrying a huge cardboard box, I finally reached the building. I raised my gaze to the parlor's banner and took a breath.

When the elevator's door opened after reaching the fifth floor, the sounds of tiles clacking against each other could be heard, and a strong tobacco smell was filling the air. The place was quite big, a little bigger than two classrooms, and there were around 10 mahjong tables, all full.

"Welcome!" An employee with an apron turned around cheerfully but his expression became confused when he looked at me, alternating stares between my face and the cardboard box.

"U-uhm... I'm not a client, is Yondaime--Uh, Souichirou-san here?"

The employee widened his eyes, surprised, and worried about the clients' gazes, he quickly guided me to the backroom.

Inside the small office there was two men. One of them was sitting on a pipe chair, had a hoodlum-like appearance and his hair was punch-permed. He was probably part of the staff of the parlor. The other young man was sitting on the desk, his hair was bleached completely white and a he had a sharp wolf-like gaze--Yondaime. He was wearing a red jacket with an embroidery of a chinese dragon that made him look even more menacing. His real name is Hinamura Souichirou, and he controls quite a lot of the juvenile delinquents of the Yamanote zone. None of the street gangs ignores the existence of the gang he leads, Hirasaka-gumi, and even some legit yakuza organizations acknowledge Hirasaka-gumi's power. Lately, they have been gaining influence in Kabuki-cho little by little, so these kind of mahjong parlors relied on them in case of trouble.

"What's with that box?" Yondaime glared at the cardboard box in my arms.

"Ah, this... A teddy bear. Its ear--"

Yondaime stepped up, shocked, and pulled my collar, grabbing the box that was about to fall from my hands with his own free hand. He whispered onto my ear with a cold, piercing voice:

"Don't talk about that out loud, what if the manager hears?" He pointed at the guy with the punch-perm with just his gaze and I tilted my head to the side to see him, putting the box down. The manager was looking at us with a confused expression. Even though he's so aggressive, sewing is Yondaime's hobby, and his skills are top-notch. He has taken care of Alice's stuffed animals many times, but of course, having such a cute hobby doesn't really fit his image, so he would obviously get angry if this was mentioned in front of other people.

"I called you because of work, why did you bring that thing here?", Yondaime said, glaring at the box with the teddy bear. The manager nervously looked at us from behind the desk, without understanding the situation.

"Alice told me to bring it to you immediately... I'm sorry."

"That brat..."

With a defeated expression, Yondaime ruffled his own hair and sat on the desk again.

"Whatever. Let's talk about work."

"Sou-san, err... Who is he...?", the manager behind Yondaime asked. He had been looking at me for a while now, probably because he didn't imagine a brat would be coming.

"He's Fujishima Narumi. You probably heard his name before."

"A-ah, uh... From the detective's office..."

My name being known in this dishonest world made me worry

about my future, but I can't refuse when Yondaime asks me a favor.

"Are there bears or something like that?"

Mahjong bear is a term originated in a novel written by Asada Tetsuya, and it refers to the people who earn money tricking inexperienced players at mahjong parlors. At the end of the ear, Shinjuku seemed to be full of people wanting to make easy money.

"There's some suspicious guys, but it's not really clear so I called you. Play on the same tables as them and observe their actions."

I placed my palm on my forehead and sighed. So it *was* about that.

"Sou-san, excuse me, but, why...? I mean, he's a high school kid, isn't he?" I made a faint affirmative sound in reply to the manager's anxious voice. It made sense that the mahjong parlor with the highest rates had a reputation to uphold.

Why did he call me? Surely there was something more competent, wasn't it?

Yondaime glared at the manager and me so sternly that it fell like he was hammering a nail with just his gaze, then he grabbed my wrist and pulled me to a shelf nearby. He took just the suited tiles from the piled up mahjong sets, putting them face down and mixing them on the desk, then he picked thirteen of the tiles without turning them over. He lined them up in a straight line and grabbed them with both hands, picking them up and showing them to me just for a short instant, then putting them back as they were before.

"Did you see them?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, more or less..."

"Was it *tenpai*?"

"It was *isshanten*, wasn't it?"

"Which tiles should you draw and which ones should you discard to get the highest tenpai?"

"If I take the 5 and I discard the 9 I'd get 147 and 25 points, I think."

Yondaime showed the thirteen tiles to the manager. The manager then aligned them in numerical order, and upon replacing and ordering them, an expression that said 'I can't believe it' appeared in his face.

"It's correct... H-he just saw them for a short while, didn't he?" The manager sounded nervous. Taken aback, I hurriedly replied:

"E-eh, well, anyone can do this, really..."

Yondaime lightly punched my back.

"Let me tell you something, since it seems you haven't realized it yet.", he said, pushing my body to the back room's exit. "From all the people I know, you're the best mahjong player. That's why I called you. Whatever, just go. I'll take care of the betting and the losses money."

*

And just like that, the second half of my winter break succumbed to the sound of the tiles mixing in the automatic mahjong table. Even if I loudly yelled that I was merely a 17-year-old high school student, no one would hear me. In that world, only words such as *ron*, *pon*, and *reach* are listened to.

After spending the whole night and going back home with my whole body smelling like tobacco, I lied down on my bed with the question *what am I doing?* invading my mind.

What am I doing... Playing mahjong, of course, but I also had to see if some suspicious people were actually cheating or not. Not only I had to do this at Tenhou Club, I was also taken to several other Kabuki-cho's mahjong parlors, joining the tables in which someone was winning big.

"How does it feel to work at a mahjong parlor?", Alice said sarcastically when I showed up at the detective office after being absent for three days.

"Do I look like a regular player that much with this suit and gray hair?"

If they found out I was a high school student they would probably close the place down, so I had made an improvised camouflage.

"Is this how you use the salary I pay you?"

"The money I bet is not even from my own wallet in the first place..."

Yondaime covered 100% of the costs. It didn't matter whether I won or lost, the important thing was observing the suspicious clients playing in the same table as them.

"Even if that's the case, you have won in all the parlors, haven't you? And Yondaime didn't tell you to return the money he gave you if you multiplied it."

"Ahh, yeah... Unexpectedly, in those clubs with high rates the players are pretty bad. A-aah, no, I'm telling you that I'm not playing mahjong to make money."

"Then for what reason did Yondaime include mahjong tiles in Moggadite's box?"

That was the first time I had heard about that, so I was surprised. Alice then took out a black case from below the neatly placed teddy bear. Inside the case there was a set of mahjong tiles. So now I have to see tiles in the office too? I don't even like mahjong that much.

"It's because I owe Yondaime.", Alice sulkily hugged her giant teddy bear. "If he asked me to give these to you I couldn't say no, but you never showed up since the beginning of the year..."

"I'm sorry I didn't come to keep you company, really."

"W-what are you saying-?"

Alice slapped the case with the palm of her hand, and the tiles inside it fell down, scattering on the blankets.

"Stop saying that like I was feeling lonely-! If you don't show up who will bring my Dr Pepper? Who will clean the office and do the laundry? That's what I meant!"

"Oh, well *excuse me*..." I picked up the scattered tiles.

"You kept winning on the spur of the moment, but you're still a beginner. You lost ryankan chances every time, and you couldn't see the indications of *chitoitsu tenpai* at all."

I was bewildered, and the tiles slipped out of my hands.

"...E-eh? Alice, you know how to play mahjong? And you saw me playing? Why?"

"I watched the security cameras' tapes."

I stood there open-mouthed. Yondaime had secretly installed those cameras to observe the suspicious clients' behavior while we played, but there was no reason to show those to Alice. She had probably cracked the cameras.

"E-eh, uhm... W-why? Why have you been watching the matches I was playing in?"

"Mh, hmph... To check on my assistant's work, obviously."

Really? Did she even see the way I played? That's a little embarrassing.

"You're a really bad player and if you lose you'll cause Yondaime trouble, so, from now on I'll be your coach!"

Saying all that, Alice started lining up the tiles on the side table. What's with all this enthusiasm...

Around thirty minutes later the intercom rang and a short-haired

girl entered, exclaiming "Happy New Year!" My classmate, and Hanamaru's employee, Ayaka.

"E-eh?"

Ayaka looked at us, speechless. In that moment, Alice took around 10000 points from me, completely destroying my self-confidence, and I just let my head fall on the mattress.

"T-that's no good, Fujishima-kun-!" Ayaka rushed up and pulled me up. "Don't make Alice play mahjong! Alice is still a little girl so it's a no-no!"

"W-what's the matter?" Alice blinked as Ayaka was taking the tiles away from her. "Mahjong doesn't have anything to do with age, it's just a game."

"But, don't you have to take off your clothes if you lose?"

"Wha-Where did you get that twisted information from-!?"

"In the first place, taking your clothes off is my job! Come on, let's take the first bath of the year!"

"Let me go-"

Ayaka pulled Alice, who hated bathing, to the bathroom. That detective incapable of taking care of herself can't bathe alone.

I sighed, looking at the tiles that had fallen to the floor, and exited the office. The evening sun looked like thousands of crystals inlaid on the winter sky.

Yondaime couldn't have possibly known. From all our acquaintances, the best mahjong player is definitely Alice.

*

But it wasn't like I was going to the mahjong parlor everyday to win. I was just doing my job.

Since I went everyday, I could find out some things about the suspicious clients. In the morning, I confirmed it with the security camera's footage at Hirasaka-gumi's office. I cropped and enlarged the pictures of the clients so I could ask the manager his opinion later.

"These three..." At the office, I showed the pictures to Yondaime and started explaining to him. The people on the pictures were all young men.

"Around the end of the year, the three of them have been winning big at different mahjong parlors."

"Together?"

"No. They were never seen entering the same place together."

"Any other reason to be wary of them?" Yondaime asked, fixing his gaze on me.

"There's a weird common trait with the way they all win..."

"Common trait?"

"Frankly, the three of them are unskillful players."

I played on the same tables, but I also observed them from behind. Their abilities were student-level, but they kept playing for a long time without losing. Just when one would think they wouldn't stop playing, they suddenly did, even having the right tiles, and then they left the table.

"Isn't that to *pass* to their partners?"

Passing is a general term which means secretly exchanging information between swindlers.

"It's possible. The three of them usually sit to play close to the toilet. Whenever they finish playing, they enter the toilet. Maybe they

contact their partners via cellphone once they're there... But I don't know from where could they see the tiles. They get winning sprees even when they're on different tables, too."

"In any case, you must keep observing.", Yondaime said. "I'll find out where do those guys come from. If we don't have proof that they're cheating I can't move."

That's true, they could just be some clients with insanely good luck. If they were'nt guilty and Yondaime accused them, it would damage the parlor's reputation.

"What does your intuition say? Are they just some lucky fellows, or are they really bears?"

"...Do you trust my intuition?"

"Intuition is important in mahjong after all, isn't it?"

I lowered my gaze to the floor. After some time, I replied:

"My intuition... is dark. There's just something unnatural about the way they play."

*

I met *that man* for the first time on the last day of my winter break. He showed up when I was playing at Kabuki-Cho's Tenhou Club in broad daylight. I heard the sound of the doorbell, and then a carefree voice.

"Shall I enter now?"

It was a middle-aged man wearing a white down jacket, he had a slight stoop and long limbs, and his droopy eyelids gave off a charm similar to that of comedians such as Akashiya Sanma or Tokoro George.

"Welcome!" The manager's brother rushed up to the man and handed him a wet towel.

There were only two active tables in that moment and I had just finished a round, so the man was guided to the seat on my right.

After around twelve rounds, I drew the Green Dragon tile. The man on my right then spoke:

"'Scuse me, I'm still gettin' used to Kantou's rules, so..."

"Uh?"

"Can you do double and triple Yakuman here?"

"E-err... There are yakuman duplications in this place, yes."

"I see. So both *tsuiso* and *su anko* count, huh. *Ron*."

The man revealed his hand. North, South, East and West wind tiles were neatly aligned, three of each kind.

"96,000 points."

That was the first time in my life I saw a *daisushi*. They said it's a hand you only see once in a lifetime, after all.

After two hours, the place fell completely silent and that big winner left, so I immediately got up and brought my palms together as a sign of apology to the manager.

"S-sorry, I'm a little uneasy about him so I'm going to watch him, I'm leaving for today..."

"A-aahh, okay, see you."

The elevator was already going down, so I rushed to the stairs. I ran among Kabuki-Cho's nighttime current of noise and neon lights, looking for that white down jacket among the crowd. He was on a pedestrian crossing at Yasukuni Dori, walking in the direction of

Yamada Denki's huge building. So I wouldn't lose sight of him and he wouldn't notice me either, I followed him while keeping a certain distance. Blending into Shinjuku's West Gate's congestion sounded like a good idea. I didn't know if that man was related to the bears or not. In fact, with such a fancy way of winning it was safe to assume he was unrelated to them, but--I just felt uneasy. I suddenly lost sight of him near a boutique. I difficultly pushed through the crowd, looking for the down jacket. He was really tall, so I couldn't have lost him just like that....

"What's this? Am I that suspicious?"

I heard a voice behind me and I literally jumped. When I turned around, I saw that man with both hands inside his pockets, grinning from ear to ear.

"E-eh, ah, n-no, I'm just..."

So he had noticed me when I was following him. I felt like sweat was dripping even from inside my ears, but the man just slapped my shoulders in a friendly manner.

"Ya make me feel a bit uneasy too, boy. Why is a high schooler doin' this kind of thing?"

I wiped the sweat out of my face.

"Eh, h-high schooler? U-uhm, what are you talking about?"

Even I noticed how bad and desperate my lie was.

"No need to play the fool there. I'm just an expert with the tiles. I also have a young kid... Well, soon you'll understand."

I was already quite worried, but the man's next words made my blood freeze.

"I didn't left evidence of my cheatin'. I noticed the cameras."

"Eh...?"

"Ya wanted to see if I had talent or not, didn't ya? Even letting me

see yer hand... Thanks for that. That camera inside the flower vase was pretty well hidden."

My face was probably incredibly pale by then, judging by the looks the passerbies were giving me.

He found out about my observer role and he even noticed the cameras.... Just who *is* this man?

"Hey, no need to be so tense.", he said, lightly slapping my cheek with the back of his hand. "I arrived to Tokyo just today. This man you were frantically chasin' is a good fellow. I just like mahjong. I've been playin' here and there but the most interestin' opponent was you, boy."

"Uhh..."

"This year I came to Tokyo to make a decision that's been quite buggin' me. When these things happen, I use mahjong to read my luck. So, if I got a daisushi, everythin' would work out fine. Well, in the end I got a triple Yakuman. Seems like this year will be packed with good stuff." The man laughed, and I didn't even know what to reply or what face I should make anymore.

At that moment, I heard the sounds of footsteps approaching us among the crowd.

"Gen-chaaaan!"

I turned around upon hearing the female voice and I saw someone running from the Alta Studio, pushing her way through without caring about the perplexed looks of the passerbies. She had wavy hair that was slightly bleached and was wearing a mink jacket and a miniskirt regardless of the winter cold. Because of her thick fake eyelashes and lip gloss, she gave off a hostess-like aura, and she looked like she was on her twenties. For some reason, I felt I had seen her face before.

"Wow... Yer late! They came to flirt with me four times while I was waiting for ya, Tokyo's so hectic it's hard to stand. Aren't we goin' to see Tamori even though we're at the Alta?"

The woman hugged the white down jacket-clad man's arm, and then she noticed me.

"Eh- W-what's this? Gen-chan, ya went flirting while I was waitin' for ya? And with a man? Yer a homo? I can't believe it, let's get separated!"

The woman shut up when the men flicked her forehead.

"Ouch! Be more gentle!"

Ah, no, she didn't shut up.

"I'll be gentle tonight at the hotel. This boy's just a friend I made at a mahjong parlor."

"Ohh... Thanks for takin' care of Gen-chan." The woman suddenly bowed, and then she furtively stepped closer to me. "Now that I look at 'im closely, he's quite a cute boy! Gen-chan, this is bad, I'm seriously thinkin' yer a homo."

"Idiot. Yer the only one I like, Rikako. Whatever, let's go. Did ya find out about the place?"

"Can't do, Tokyo's subway's like spaghetti. If we get on the wrong train we could end up at Aomori or Los Angeles."

It was hard for me to keep up with that situation and I could only stand there.

That woman must be her lover or something like that, right? Well, he is good-looking, and as I could see at the mahjong club, his purse is also quite full.

"Ah, boy." The man suddenly talked to me again.

"Y-yes?"

"We wanna make the first visit to the shrine, do ya know where Suitengu shrine is? We're not really familiar with Tokyo..."

"Ah, y-yes."

I took out my cellphone and checked the route from Shinjuku's station to Suitengu-mae station.

"Do you know Soubu line's platform? Entering JR's ticket office from the East gate, uhm... If I remember correctly, the first entrance. Then you switch trains at Kinshi-cho..."

Even me, who had been living in Tokyo for and year and a half still got a little lost at Shinjuku Station, so I explained really carefully.

"Thanks a lot, boy!"

"Really, thanks!"

The weird couple waved goodbye and they walked the pedestrian crossing in front of the Alta, disappearing from my sight among the crowd as they reached the East gate.

With my hands on a railing, I took a deep breath. It felt like suddenly all the pores in my body were emitting tiredness. Who was that man? His mahjong abilities were from another dimension, but that wasn't the only thing that made me feel uneasy. The same happened with the woman; even if I had seen her for only five minutes, I felt a weird sensation in my chest. She reminded me of someone, but, who?

When I returned to Tenhou Club, the manager approached me with a gloomy expression and told me in a low voice:

"Uhm... Fujishima-san."

Don't call me 'san', I'm just a high school student...

"That man from before, he has been winning big at several parlors since this morning..."

Yondaime had formed a formidable web of contact between all the parlors he had been taking care of, so the information had spread in a short time. The manager lowered his voice again:

"But he's a new face, from Kansai. Just who was that man?"

"Mnn, I don't know. I'll report to Yondaime, for now."

It was then when I realized what the reason of my uneasiness was. Yondaime. When I saw their faces, for some reason I was reminded of Yondaime.

*

The next day, I went directly to Hirasaka-gumi's office to tell Yondaime about what had happened. The office of the strongest gang of the zone is on the opposite side of the NEET Detective Agency and the station, across the commercial district. It's a small building; in the fist floor there's a fancy store where they sell various imported goods, and the group's office is on the third floor.

"Aniki, thanks for your hard work!"

"Thanks for your hard work!"

When I entered the office I was greeted with throaty voices from left to right, and the delinquents in black shirts with an emblem on the chest were aligned, bowing. Yondaime was sitting behind the desk across the glass coffee table.

Even after becoming their boss' sworn brother, the members of the group kept calling me Aniki. I'll never get used to that way of greeting, so I wish they'd stop doing it.

"We have to greet Alice-neesan for the New Year, what should we give her as a present?"

"If it's for Ane-san, a plushie would be perfect!"

They also refer to Alice as 'ane-san', a high hierarchy title towards yakuza women surpassed only by 'oyabun'. As for why do they respect the tiny detective so much, I really don't know.

"Let's give her a plushie of this year's animal from the chinese calendar!" "That's perfect!"

"Which animal is it this year?"

Yondaime slapped the desk just once making his followers shut up immediately, and spoke to me as he signaled me to get closer with his hand:

"I just spoke a little with Tenhou Club's manager. I guess I'll see the security camera's pictures soon but, what did that guy look like?"

When I physically described that 'Gen-chan' and told him about his behavior, Yondaime's expression darkened, and when I told him a young woman that looked like his lover or something like that was waiting for him and they called each other 'Gen-chan' and 'Rikako' respectively, Yondaime suddenly grabbed my collar.

"You sure? Did they really called each other that?"

"Eh, a-ah, y-yes..." That hurts... Why is he doing this all of a sudden? Does he know them?

At that moment the steel door cracked open, and one of the lackeys poked his head in.

"Sou-san, some weird guy came here saying that he has business with you--Ah, oi, you bastard!"

Apparently there was someone else behind the steel door, as the lackey looked behind him and then was pushed inside the office. A man in a white down jacket forced his way in.

"What the hell are you doing, you bastard?!"

"Do you even know where you are?!"

The lackeys inside the office suddenly got up upon seeing the intruder. I nearly cried out: It was the man from the day before. He looked around the interior of the office with his sleepy expression caused by his droopy eyes.

"I ain't interested in small fry, I wanna see Souichirou."

Ignoring the man's words, the black shirts went against him at the same time. What happened after that is difficult to explain. One by one, some lackeys were thrown against the wall, while others flew spectacularly, falling face first onto the sofas. I could barely see the man's movements. When I took a deep breath, feeling quite tense, none of the black shirts were left standing.

"...You bastard"

"Son of a..."

They were getting up to attack once again, but Yondaime's sharp voice resounded inside the office:

"Stop. Stay away from him."

The man snorted, stepping over the collapsed group members, and sat down on one of the sofas with his legs together.

"Yer men are rude and the office is dirty... I'm disappointed."

"Why are you here?", Yondaime asked, glaring at him, to which the man responded by pushing his lower lip out in a mocking way.

"Well, I came to see ya, Souichirou."

"Get lost."

"Hey, yer father is--"

"Just go."

With my jaw open, I could just look at Yondaime and the other man again and again, comparing their faces. When he noticed, Yondaime clicked his tongue and asked:

"This was the guy at the mahjong parlor?"

Words wouldn't come out of my mouth, so I just nodded. With a

disdainful voice, Yondaime said:

"He's the third generation of the Hinamura family, Genichirou."

All the lackeys were ordered to exit the office, and only I was left in the middle of that strange father-son reunion. I sat next to Yondaime on the sofa and observed Hinamura Genichirou's face once again. He didn't look like a business person at all, he really looked more like a comedian. But his abilities a while ago had been definitely the real thing, and his enthusiasm for mahjong was also legit as far as I had seen.

"Fujishima Narumi, aren't ya? Souichirou's sworn brother." Genichirou-san suddenly brought up the subject, making me shiver.

"Eh, ah..."

"You know about that?" Yondaime asked, sulking.

"I found out lotsa things about my cute only son. Did ya drink sake with him? Ya said ya hated that all that stuff but ya seem to be caught up on 'em, aren't ya?"

"Shut up. Where's mother? I heard you brought her along."

"Ahh, Rikako's at the hotel's spa. We walked a lot yesterday so she's tired."

...Wait a second. Wait a second! I can't ignore that!

"Yondaime.... T-that woman is.... y-your mom?"

"Ain't she a beauty? Souichirou looks a lot like his mother."

"H-how old is she?"

"Forty-three.", Yondaime answered.

"Eeeeeeeeeh!?"

That's impossible. It can't be!

"Every night in bed I tell 'er how cute she is, that's why she keeps lookin' young."

"Please don't flaunt your sexual harassment in front of your own son."

"But if it wasn't for my sexual harassment Souichirou wouldn't have been born."

"The 'harassment' part wasn't needed!"

"Souichirou, this lil' brother of yours is a good tsukkomi. I should take him back home with ya so ya both can become a manzai duo and make yer debut at Yoshimoto."

"We're not a manzai duo! ...I-I mean, e-eeh?"

Take him back home? I looked at Genichirou-san's face and averted my eyes from Yondaime's gloomy expression.

"Yer gonna have to start studying to inherit the business. Go back to Osaka."

"As if, you idiot."

"Yer room looks the same as ever. Every night, Rikako smells your sheets and cries."

"I don't wanna know about that!" Yondaime lost his composure and replied violently, putting a regretful expression immediately afterwards.

"I was lyin' though."

"Shut up! Then don't say it!"

"But I was serious about ya returnin' home. Ya've played in Tokyo enough."

"I'm not playing."

"Oh～?"

A smile appeared on Genichirou-san's face, and I shuddered. He had the same look on his face he had that time at the mahjong parlor, when he showed his hand.

"How much was yer taxable income this last year?"

"Just the personal income?"

"Yeah."

"108,000,000."

I gasped without letting Yondaime and Genichirou-san hear me; I knew he earned quite a lot but that amount was beyond my imagination.

"See? Yer just playin'."

"So what? You can't take me by force. There's no way I'd lose against a shitty old man like you."

"I'm an adult. I can't just go punchin' and dodgin' and throwin' people to the floor."

"You did all that just now."

"His tsukkomi timings are perfect! Yer little brother's really somethin'." I covered my face with one of my hands. I subconsciously rebuked him... Are all people from Osaka really boke?

"Buy ya know..." Genichirou-san resumed his talk. "Yer within the reach of my hands now, too, since yer not just playin' yakuza like a brat like ya've been doin' 'til now."

"What do you mean?"

"Ya have a company. Now yer also a part of the financial world."

I could almost hear the sound of my own back freezing. The malicious gaze that appeared on Genichirou-san's face was

definitely a wolf gaze. Like father, like son.

"Money is everythin' in this world. I can easily break into yer territory. Ya know what that means?"

*

At that time I didn't quite understand what he meant, and it wasn't until the next day that everything finally dawned on me. Because of the third term's opening ceremony we only had classes in the morning, so after school I went to the bank, holding a heavy suitcase. By the end of the year several bills to pay had accumulated in Hirasaka-Gumi's account, so Yondaime asked me to take care of them as usual.

When I was waiting by the bank's box office, a door at my right opened and my breathing stopped for a second when I saw the person that came out. Genichirou-san. Behind him there was a suit-clad middle-aged man (most likely the manager), and upon seeing them, the employees of the bank bowed several times.

Genichirou-san noticed I was there, too. With a mysterious smile, he turned to the manager.

"Well, I leave it in yer hands."

"Understood, sir."

A bad feeling rushed up my throat. I stared at Genichirou-san as he crossed the automatic door, leaving. Why was he here? Was it because of something related to Yondaime? This was the main bank Yondaime used to manage his incomes after all. An uneasiness feeling took over my body, and the words Genichirou-san had said the day before resurfaced in my mind. Money's everything in this world. Being at the reach of his hands.

I hurried back to Hirasaka-Gumi's office and noticed Yondaime was talking on the phone.

"...But-! If you don't let me talk about it soon it'll become a problem, no, but... Yes, okay... No, in any case, please let me just ask one thing--...What are you talking about? That's not it!"

Apparently the person on the other side of the line hung up, so Yondaime angrily threw the receiver back into the base. The lackeys inside the building passed their worried looks to me.

"...U-uhm, I went to the bank."

"Ah, sorry for the trouble." Saying that even when he was visibly angry, Yondaime rested his whole back on the back of the chair.

"I saw Genichirou-san at the bank. He looked like he was asking something to the manager."

When I said that, Yondaime suddenly stood up, but he sat down again and sighed.

"...I see. So it was indeed that damn bastard's doing."

"Did something happen?"

"They stopped financing me."

I gulped and sat on the back of a sofa. Yondaime's event coordination company had started just last year and it had already successfully promoted various concerts, but it was still a growing business, so if they stopped financing it, it would go bankrupt.

"...Genichirou-san stopped it? Can he really do that?"

"Hinamura can do that, yes. He's the president of the chamber of commerce and industry, and he also has several branches in Tokyo."

I had completely underestimated the Hinamura family. I has just heard that they had a family stall-keeper business, so I had arbitrarily imagined a chain of small, old stores that had been barely subsisting for a while. But they were actually really far from that, they had a large-scale business company.

Yondaime had already set foot in the financial world when he

started his own business, and that was the reason the bank had been providing him funding. And that money with overwhelming liquidity and an anonymous nature was actually connected with a blood relationship. According to Pascal's theory, wherever a pressure is applied, it will be exerted evenly in all directions. And that had been proven by a phone call just now.

"This is my problem, so it has nothing to do with you. That man is a good-for-nothing so stay away from him. He's not related to the mahjong group either. You just focus on that."

After he said that, Yondaime kicked me out of the office. With my chest still filled with feelings of confusion, I walked to the exit of the building, when I heard the footsteps of a number of people walking down the stairs.

"Aniki! Please wait, Aniki!" The giants in black T-shirts appeared one by one by the stairs. Between them there were two men even bigger than the rest, the longest standing members of the group, Rocky and Pole.

"Uhm, we don't know what just happened and we can't really ask Sou-san about it, could you please tell us?"

We were obstructing the way and we couldn't talk like that, so I guided them back upstairs.

"The man from yesterday is Yondaime's dad... Did you hear about that?"

"Yes!"

"Sou-san's father could kill us instantly!"

"He was really strong!" "He hit me too!"

"It looks like his dad wants to take him back to Osaka."

"Really!?" "We will expand to Osaka!" "Soon we will conquer the whole country!"

"No, it's not that... The company that Yondaime founded could

collapse, do you understand? And if his other source of income disappears, Hirasaka-Gumi will have to be dissolved, too."

"That's impossible!" "We left our lives in Sou-san's hands when we drank sake with him, so nothing can get us apart!" "We have decided to follow him for the rest of our lives!"

The dumb Hirasaka-Gumi's lackeys were really optimistic this time, but reality was crueler than that.

"If the company bankrupts the income will become negative, generating debts. That man has the power to stop his financiation, so if Yondaime goes bankrupt, he'll disband the group so he won't cause trouble to all of you."

"S-sou-san..."

"For our sake, uuuh....."

"He disbanded the gang for our sake..."

Hey, he hasn't done it yet.

"Then--Then, Aniki!" Pole grabbed both of my arms. "What shall we do!? We're stupid and don't understand, should we hit his father? We don't have a victory spirit, but we're willing to die."

The other lackeys got closer to me with serious looks on their faces. I was beginning to feel overwhelmed and I gently brushed Denchu's arms off my shoulders.

"I... don't know what to do either."

January's days are short, so when I reached Hanamaru it was already getting dark. The three guys from the NEET Detective Squad were together in the alley in front of the kitchen door.

"Vice-Admiral Fujishima, it's been a while! How about we visit Yasukuni Shrine for the New Year?"

Major was the first one who got up when he saw me, dressed in a

military jacket with a camouflage pattern. Because of his short height and child-like face anyone would think he's an elementary schooler, but he's actually a university student who has already repeated a year. Because of his notorious military-mania, he calls me Vice-Admiral for some reason.

"If we're going to go to a military-related shrine, why don't we go to Tougo instead?" Tetsu-senpai interjected. "The gods of gambling are there, if I remember correctly."

"Believing that His Excellence Tougou was merely lucky is plain wrong! His Excellence was a unique strategist who was able to miraculously obtain victory and returned alive, an ordinary lucky person would have died a hundred times in the sea--"

"I've had enough with visiting shrines..." Hiro-san interrupted Major's passionate speech. "I even went to the shrine at Narita mountain. Each girl picked a different shrine..."

"You could just gather everyone at the same place. Koufuku-ji would be a good pick because of the Ashura statue. It would be a complete bloodbath."

"If I do something so dangerous, they could stab me to death."

The NEETs laugh irresponsibly. Exhausted, I sat on the beer crate we used as a seat, unable to keep up with their sense of humor. Hiro-san glanced at me.

"What's wrong?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again, thinking. Should I talk about that with them? And how much should I talk? It was a private matter so I couldn't talk about it easily, but I didn't want to carry all the burden alone either. I chose my words carefully and started talking. I told them I had met Yondaime's parents. I didn't tell them about the relationship between him and his dad, I just mentioned that Genichirou-san wanted to take Yondaime back by force, and about Hirasaka-gumi's difficult situation.

When I finished speaking, after a moment of silence, the first one

who opened his mouth was Tetsu-senpai.

"...So, Yondaime's mother looks young and pretty, doesn't she?" I raised my gaze and nodded faintly.

"So if Hiro seduces her..."

"No, even for me, seducing a friend's mother is a bit..."

"If he were to be successful, Hiro-san would become Yondaime's father. That would be incredible." Major added.

"If Yondaime would call me 'dad', I could just die from laughter."

I hid my face on my knees. I was an idiot for trying to consult with them. It was none of my business in the first place, Yondaime had said that himself, this was Hinamura family's problem.

I felt a hand on my back. When I raised my head, I saw Hiro-san smile, then Tetsu-senpai grinning with folded arms, and Major's ironic expression as he pushed his goggles up his forehead.

"...Come on, Narumi-kun, don't let something like this get you down." Hiro-san said.

"Eh...?"

"You don't intend to ignore Yondaime's family situation anyway, do you?"

I gulped, reflecting on Hiro-san's words. Of course, he was right. I didn't want to ignore his situation.

"If you need an excuse, I can give you one." Tetsu-senpai said. "You're Yondaime's sworn brother. So, his family problems are your problems too."

I felt those words directly on my chest. I nodded and got up, brushing the dirt off my trousers.

"I'm going to see Alice."

"I'll find his whereabouts immediately." Alice said while incessantly typing on the keyboard. "But, what are you going to do when you meet the Hinamuras?"

"I haven't decided yet." I frankly answered. "I don't understand Genichirou-san's intentions yet."

"Hmm" Alice turned around. "You mean that you don't quite believe Hinamura Genichirou's words about coming to Tokyo to take his son back."

I nodded.

"It's just that, pressuring Hirasaka-gumi and the company to go bankrupt won't make Yondaime want to inherit the family business. Even if he ends up covered in debts, he definitely won't cast his pride aside."

"I agree."

"I don't understand why Genichirou-san came here in the first place. He wanted Yondaime to go back to Osaka from the start, why did he come to Tokyo just now? I think he's hiding something. Maybe he came here to negotiate something in person."

If that was the case, he would want to be in a favorable position beforehand. Alice shook her shoulders, chuckling.

"The true reason they came to Tokyo just know... I already know that reason, more or less."

"E-eh?"

"He told you about that himself. He came to *visit the shrine*."

I blinked a few times. Visiting the shrine? He *had* told me about that, yes, but, what did she mean by saying that was his true reason?

"Forget about that for now. I don't have enough proof so I can't give

you that information. About the hotel where they're staying..."

Alice's hands slid over the keyboard, and the monitors around the bed on the upper right side blinked. Data from guests staying at Tokyo's hotels were obtained by cracking. Alice mentioned a hotel in Akasaka.

"Room number 3301. Do you want me to find out his cellphone number too?"

"Ah, no, it's okay. I'll go there directly without saying anything."

"Hmm. Because the price would be higher if I found out a cellphone number. Wise decision."

Even if it was a favor to her assistant, she mercilessly charged for her investigation.

"My detective work ends here. Do you best for your sworn brother's sake. Yondaime is my favorite client, so if he goes bankrupt it will be a problem."

I opened my mouth, without knowing if I should say it or not.

"No--Alice, I think you can cooperate a bit more." A hint of perplexity appeared on her big, round eyes.

"Why? I don't have a right to get involved beyond this."

To tell the truth, a plan consisting in suggesting a deal to Genichirou-san was slowly appearing in my mind. It was an undeniably stupid plan, but I had the feeling that something like a miracle could happen. And Alice was needed for that. For that reason, I proceeded to convince her using a fake argument.

"Because, you see, Alice, you're Hirasaka-gumi's *anego*, aren't you?"

Her bewildered face at that moment was such a rare sight that I even thought about taking a picture.

"So this is your problem too, Alice."

Contrasting its luxurious exterior, the first-class hotel was a place where it was almost insultingly easy to sneak into. When it got dark, the lobby got packed with foreigners carrying suitcases with airport tags, so I entered without being even barely noticed. The receptionist was really polite and greeted even a brat like me with a smile.

"I'd like to announce myself to Hinamura-san who is staying at room 3301. Uuhm, I'm Fujishima and I came in behalf of Souichirou..."

The young receptionist picked up the phone and I skimmed through pamphlet from the hotel that was lying around, and I learned that room 3301 was a suite that took up the whole floor. Well, I had imagined something like that to be honest.

Okay, what should I say? I need to concentrate....

"Hinamura-sama will be here soon." the receptionist said. "Please wait over there for a while."

Ah, so he's coming here? Well, obviously he wouldn't let someone he only saw two times into his suite. I sat down on a sofa in the lobby and waited.

After two minutes--

"Naru-chan!"

A female voice broke the calm atmosphere of the lobby. Employees and guests were equally startled and turned to look at the elevator. I also quickly got up.

"I'm so glad ya came, Gen-chan's not here so I was gettin' bored." Rikako-san rushed up to me. She was wearing a light purple dress and a long translucent stole. I took a step backwards; I didn't foresee Rikako-san being the one who would come.

"...A-ah, sorry for showing up so suddenly." I sat down once again. So Genichirou-san is not here... I'll have to come here again some

other time, then. Meanwhile I had no other option than to talk to Rikako-san, even though she made me kind of nervous (and she's Yondaime's mother!) However, before I could say anything, Rikako-san grabbed my arm, saying "let's have some tea, c'mon" as she pulled me to the cafeteria at the right of the lobby.

Sitting in front of Rikako-san, I looked at the menu with its prices such as 1400 yens for a cup of coffee. *What am I doing?* I scolded myself. When I raised my gaze. I saw Rikako-san dialing a number on her cellphone.

"Ah, Gen-chan? It's me. Ya know? Naru-chan just came here. Yeah. We're at the lounge in the first floor. Yeah, come back soon, okay? Fine. Love ya. See ya later!" After she snapped her cellphone shut, Rikako-san ordered two pieces of cake and two cups of coffee and she leaned her body forward with sparkling eyes.

"I'll hear eeeeverything ya have to say, Naru-chan. Gen-chan wants to bully Sou-chan so he's been investigating lotsa stuff about Hirasaka-gumi. But it was such a coincidence to meet ya as soon as we arrived to Tokyo! Thanks again for helpin' us with Suitengu, Naru-chan."

"Eh...."

I wish she would stop calling me Naru-chan. Many people has called me many different names, but this nickname is particularly embarrassing.

"Uhm, you both came here because Yondaime--I mean, Souichirou-san..."

"Yondaime sounds cute.", Rikako-san said. "I like that nickname. I wonder if I should start callin' 'em Sandaime and Yondaime too..."

Aren't they your own husband and son?

"Ya guys drank sake together, didn'tcha? That's so cute... Since he was little, Sou-chan has always been so stubborn and cute..."

And with that, she spent 45 whole minutes telling me lovely stories about Yondaime's childhood. He would slaughter me if I dared to

mention one of these stories concretely, so I won't write them here.

"Is Sou-chan doin' fine here? Is he takin' good care of himself? Is he eatin' right? He's quite skillful, does he cook his own meals?"

"Eh, ah, well... I don't know that much about his personal life..."

She really is his mother, I thought as I looked at her closely. Her makeup was applied with utmost care and her skin was really smooth, that's why she looked like she was still on her twenties.

She then looked at me. Oops, that was close.

"Ya know, I ain't a good cook. Even if we go back together to Osaka, I don't think he misses mom's cookin' or anythin' like that."

"Aah, uhm..." Finally there was an excuse to start talking about that matter, so I held onto that. "Did you really come here to take him away?"

"I have that intention, yeah", Rikako-san said as she poked her own cheek with her index and ring fingers in an adorable gesture. "But I don't know about Gen-chan."

"You don't know?"

"To Gen-chan, he's not his kid but Hinamura family's successor. He'd need his consent to take 'im back, wouldn't he? If so, why is he picking a fight investigatin' and all that?"

Not his son, but his successor... I scratched my head. Investigating? Is that something that can be easily done? Isn't Yondaime's company so new that it's practically growing by word of mouth and trustworthy people only, and if its financing were to be taken away it would just disappear?

"If Sou-chan goes back, will ya feel lonely, Naru-chan?"

"Lonely? Well, yes, I would, but what I'm trying to say is--"

"Why don't ya come with him?"

"Eh?"

"Ya two are sworn brothers. Doesn't that make ya my son too? Doncha wanna live with us? Ya will be welcome in this family!"

"Nonono"

"Havin' a family of 4 is a dream of mine. We could all play family mahjong!"

With my mouth half open, I stared at Rikako-san as she was daydreaming. I had initially thought my plan was absurd, but an opportunity was unexpectedly presented. Maybe I could carry on.

"U-uhm, so..."

Rikako-san suddenly stood up and waved her hand, facing the cafeteria's door.

"Gen-chan! Over here!"

I sighed and turned around, seeing a surprising scene. On the opposite side of the spacious lobby, outside the hotel, men in suits that made no effort at all in concealing their identities as Yakuza got off from a row of parked imported cars and bowed at the same time. From the side door of one of those cars, a man in a white down jacket got off too--Genichirou-san. There were lots of people registering at that time, so the lobby broke into murmurs. It looked just like a scene from *Minbo no Onna*. The old hotelier's face paled. But the only one who entered the lobby was Genichirou-san, and the rest of the men dressed in black returned to their cars. Apparently they were just there to escort him.

"Boy, I heard ya came here at midnight to steal my wife so I had to come runnin'. I even thought about sendin' one or two of my men to greet ya."

After saying those scary words, Genichirou-san sat by my side for some reason. So he won't let me run away... Just as I thought, this man is half yakuza.

"Yer sayin' that as if I wasn't faithful. Gen-chan's the only one I

blindly love."

"So ya unblindly love other men?"

"Wouldn't that be ya?"

"Even at the top of Tsuutenkaku tower, I wouldn't see anyone except for ya."

If he had to listen to this kind of stuff everyday, I understand why Yondaime ran away from home. They went on for a while, and my head was starting to hurt already.

"I don't understand what you're saying anymore!"

"Oh, the boy started with his specialty again."

"I didn't come here to do manzai! I--" I became exasperated and got up from my seat just when the waiter came to take Genichirou-san's order, so I sat down again. Some of the clients had noticed and they were looking in our direction. I'm sorry. Once I cooled down, I carefully chose my words, took a deep breath and let my voice come out:

"It's about Yondaime. I'll get straight to the point: Leave the company linked with Hirasaka-gumi alone, please."

Genichirou-san squinted by my side.

"Boy, ya don't have a reason to meddle, do ya?"

"I'm his sworn brother."

"Oh? If ya say so." Genichirou-san raised his eyebrows showing an amused expression. "But that sounds like yer just openin' yet mouth to spout a frivolous excuse. I wanna hear a concrete reason."

"Even if you make his company go bankrupt and cover him with debts, he's not the kind of person who will obediently return to his parents. No matter how you look at it, what you're doing is meaningless. Please, stop."

"Did I say I wanted to make the company go bankrupt so Souichirou would return home?"

"...Eh?"

Genichirou-san's mocking gaze felt burning like cold fire.

"B-but, you made the bank stop financing him..."

"Listen, I can crush anyone when I get mad, even my own son, and demonstrating that is not somethin' meaningless in this world. Brats shouldn't be talkin' as if they knew everythin'."

I shivered. Maybe my senses were already numb. Maybe I was already used to step on territories I shouldn't be familiar with. But that man wasn't 'half' yakuza, he was a complete, legit yakuza. Not because he was part of a group of gangsters or anything like that, but because in his soul's stairway, he was someone who could ignore the other party's pain when he used his own fists to hit them--Hinamura Genichirou was a genuine yakuza.

My hands were trembling over my knees. What else should I say?

"That's not all, though. There someone else who could become Hinamura family's heir.", Genichirou-san suddenly spoke. "I couldn't decide if I should pick Souichirou or this other person. That's why I came to Tokyo, to see how far Souichirou's talent goes. So it's kinda the opposite of what ya were thinkin', boy. I ain't interested in entrustin' the family to someone who would go bankrupt just because of this."

I was in mute amazement. Wasn't that much worse? If Yondaime could manage to keep the company they would make him go back, and if he went bankrupt they would just abandon him like trash.

"In that case, all the more reason--"

"All the more reason *what*? I have to see if he can go on with the company or not. Do ya have a better idea to make him demonstrate he can keep the business goin' in the real world?"

I couldn't say anything, so I lowered my gaze.

"Gen-chan, yer bullyin' my Naru-chan. I forgive ya if yer a homo, but if yer a sadist then I want the divorce."

"So if I'm just gay it's okay?"

"So ya were gay!? Let's get separated!"

I was feeling utterly depressed and I didn't have energy to open my mouth, so the person who interrupted their manzai routine this time was the waiter bringing the coffee. Genichirou-san flicked his wife's forehead to make her shut up and drank a sip of coffee, talking to me once again.

"Ya ain't no idiot, boy. What are ya plannin' to do? C'mon, tell me."

"N-no, nothing..."

"Ya can say it."

I balled into fists my sweaty hands over my knees. I can't take this anymore.

At that moment, Rikako-san spoke:

"How 'bout we play mahjong?"

My shoulders shook because of my surprise. Genichirou-san brought the cup to his lips, frowning.

"Mahjong?"

"Yeah. Just a moment ago I was sayin' it would be nice to play family mahjong and Naru-chan's eyes were sparklin'"

Ugh. Did I really make such an easily read expression? Genichirou-san let out a guffaw and settled himself comfortably in his chair beside me.

"Then, uh, even if Yondaime's company goes bankrupt there's nothing you gain with that, right? So, how about we have a match and make a bet? Uhmm--" For example, if I lost I would pay him whatever amount he wanted, and if I won he would have to leave

Yondaime alone. I was intending to reach a simple conclusion. However, Genichirou-san wouldn't stop laughing, but unexpectedly Rikako-san interrupted.

"What? I don't see what's so funny. Dontcha use mahjong to make yer decisions, Gen-chan? Sayin' stuff like 'if I make a daisangen I'll expand to Italy' and all that. It's also the first time we have four players... And, wouldn't it be good if we set a really high rate so we can take all of Sou-chan's money? Way better than coercin' the bank."

"Well yeah, that's right."

Hey, wait a second. Was that last thing something a mother should say? Don't turn the conversation that way please, I would be willing to bet all that money if it was just me, but I can't afford to risk making Yondaime go bankrupt.

"How's that idea sound to ya, Souichirou?" Genichirou-san said out of the blue. I was startled and followed Genichirou-san's gaze-- There was no one there. But when Rikako-san got up with her eyes sparkling exclaiming "Sou-chan!", I realized. Nervously turning my head around, I saw the sleeves of a crimson jacket.

"What the hell are you doing? I thought I told you not to get involved."

Yondaime's voice was sharp as a knife. Since when is he there? And does Genichirou-san have eyes on his back or something? He could also easily see the cameras that time when we played mahjong.

"What 'bout ya, why are ya here?" Genichirou-san said in a calm manner as he raised the cup to his lips, without turning around. "It's past midnight. Brats should be sleepin' at home."

"I came to put an end to this." Yondaime just stood there behind Genichirou-san and me with his hands inside his pockets. The waiter glanced in our direction from time to time with a worried expression. "I might not be able to avoid your dirty hands now, but I know quite a lot about the Hinamura's shady stuff. I can make us even."

"Shady or not, it doesn't matter. That's how money's used. I told ya already, it's the most effective thing to crush others."

"Like I care. I'll go to Osaka's public prosecutor's office and I'll tell them to call the bank."

"C'mon, both of ya..." Rikako-san said. Genichirou-san finally supported his elbow on the back of the chair and turned around. Both wolf gazes clashed with each other.

"Do as Rikako said. Siddown."

"I didn't come here to have tea. Unlike that kid, I don't feel like babbling nonsense with an annoying fellow."

"Oh, it's nothin' like that.", Genichirou-san saido. "We were talkin' about settling this with a mahjong board. This boy came all the way here to talk about that. Quite the cute lil' brother, ain't he?"

I sighed and looked at the three. Rikako-san was exchanging glances between his husband and his son with the serious expression of a middle school girl who just hid a love letter in a shoe locker. Genichirou-san had turned his gaze to the cup of coffee on the table again. Yondaime had fallen silent with his gaze fixed between my shoulder and Genichirou-san's.

"...Did he really suggest a mahjong match?" he finally sat down, poking my head. Rikako-san nodded, and I didn't say anything since it wouldn't make a difference anyway. For an instant only, Yondaime looked at me. Just by looking at his eyes I understood what he was trying to ask me: *Do we have a chance of winning?* I nodded just with my gaze, without letting Genichirou-san notice. Yondaime then looked at Genichirou-san.

"...What will be the rate?"

A slight smile appeared on Genichirou-san's lips.

"5 points would be nice."

"Cash payment?"

"Of course. As I already said, ya and I ain't father and son anymore. deferred payment is okay too, since I'm gonna crush ya."

I felt relaxed upon hearing that. After that, they kept talking about terms and conditions of the match that I couldn't understand at all, but there was no place for me to mention the victory condition I had thought about anymore.

"I never thought of you as a father in the first place, you bastard. I cut off my ties with you long ago.", Yondaime said, taking a deep breath. "Let me decide the minor rules."

"Fine. In exchange, I will decide the place. I'll also buy brand new tables. Tokyo is yer territory, so I won't let ya cheat."

Yondaime and I left the hotel together. The lights of the luxurious Akasaka buildings spread on the night sky and the wind was blowing, mixing with the smell of the exhaust pipes as we were going down the slope of the vehicle entrance, cooling down my face that was burning because of my nervousness and excitement. I had been worried about how things would turn out, but Rikako-san had saved me.

"Why did you look so relieved?" Yondaime muttered under his jacket's collar.

"Eh? ...Ah, well, I didn't quite understand what I heard about the terms of the match, but I didn't think the rate was that high. It's just 5 points, isn't it?"

In mahjong, 5 points normally means that 1000 points = 50 yens. In a 30 minute lapse, even without playing very well we would only lose around 3000 yens, not really an amount to worry about. It really wasn't an amount that would make someone say 'I'll crush you' with a scary face. However, Yondaime heaved a long sigh and started walking faster.

"Are you an idiot? Do you think that damn yakuza would play with those student mahjong rates?"

"...E-eh?"

"5 points to the Hinamura family means *5000 yens for each point.*"

I froze in the middle of the slope that led to the main street. A broken calculator was giving off sparks inside my head. My calculations had been completely wrong--In the most literal sense.

One point = 5000 yens?

I saw Yondaime's back as he was walking away. Right. Didn't Rikako-san say so herself? That thing about taking all his money. 5000 yens for each point. If we lost all of our points, the payment would exceed 100.000.000.

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"...So, I'm your trump card? Way to count your chickens before they hatch!" Alice's voice was colder than the conditioned air inside the room.

"Y-yeah... I also thought it was wrong to make this plan without saying anything to you, but I wasn't sure I could manage to arrange a mahjong match."

"You just didn't want to deal with me telling you that your idea was naive, am I mistaken?"

She was right. From the other side of the bed, I hung my head, defeated. The day after talking with Genichirou-san, I showed up at the NEET Detective Agency immediately after school, just to be scolded by Alice. Not that I didn't deserve it, I had gotten her involved in my irrational mahjong plan. Genichirou-san's abilities were way far from average, so most likely he thought his victory was assured. But he didn't know about Alice's existence, so that gave us the possibility of having an advantage.

"In short, you're saying I should play mahjong with the three

members of the Hinamura family?"

"...Well, yes, basically. Yondaime absolutely has to play."

Alice sighed. "It's true that I'm unbeatable and currently undefeated at online mahjong, but that doesn't mean anything in front of someone who is able to cheat."

"But you're much better than me, aren't you? Even if I worked hard and we managed to find a way to play without letting him cheat, I still wouldn't stand a chance against Genichirou-san at normal mahjong. But if you're the one who plays..."

"You're worse than a chimpanzee. At least a monkey has the brains to run away when he's in front of an opponent he can't win against!" The detective was as harsh with me as usual. "Not to mention, what's with that ridiculous rate? Have you lost all sense of money because you've been playing with someone else's money for too long?"

"I know, but..."

Before parting ways with Yondaime the night before, I had asked him about that strange rate with numbers that could easily send one to bankrupt. In the first place, we didn't want money, we needed Genichirou-san to stop pressuring the bank, so the betting rates shouldn't have mattered that much. If our side won Genichirou-san wouldn't interfere with Yondaime anymore, and if we lost we would have to pay--That was the original agreement. But Yondaime answered this:

"Do you think that bastard will just obediently leave me alone if he loses the match? He'll keep bothering for as long as he can. So, there's no other option than to solve this with money. The best way to do that would be taking away enough money from him to make him unable to stay in Tokyo. He might be rolling in cash back at Osaka, but I don't think he has more than 100.000.000 in cash over here, so he will have to leave."

Alice stared at the roof like she was praying. "I understand the reasoning, but it's not normal for a father and a son to want to

cannibalize each other like that."

"Yeah, it seems like those two don't think of each other as a father and a son respectively. They said they had cut their ties." Now that I thought about it, not even once I had heard Yondaime refer to Genichirou-san as his father.

"And, will Yondaime really let us take part of this outrageous bet?"

"Yes. If I tell him you're better than me, I'm sure he will make a formal request."

"Good grief. I was under the impression that he was a shrewder man than that, but it looks like his stupid sworn brother has weakened his rationality."

Yondaime came as soon as it got dark, and once again I realized my own stupidity.

"Genichirou sent the place he chose."

I took the fax paper Yondaime held out to me and noticed there was a map printed on it below the designed date and all that. There was a placed in the middle marked with an X.

"This is... Near the Arakawa river, isn't it? What place is it exactly?"

"It's not *near*. The place *is* Arakawa's riverbed."

My jaw dropped and I was unable to move. Alice snatched the paper away from my hands. The river bed? Outdoors?

"Were you really thinking about asking Alice to be your replacement?" Yondaime asked with an astonished expression. I nodded, still bewildered.

"Hmph. Genichirou said we would do it outdoors so we wouldn't cheat, but his true intention was to leave Alice out of the game."

"E-eh-?" I stared at Yondaime with my eyes wide open. "He said he

had investigated lots of things, but he had no way to know Alice was good at mahjong, had he?"

"He probably knows that we know a highly intelligent agoraphobic shut-in, there's also the fact that she's considered Hirasaka-gumi's anego, and your unusual confidence. Genichirou's way of doing business basically consists in crushing his opponent, with utmost efficiency."

I looked up at the roof and sighed. I had been too naive.

"Why do you both think I've been only listening quietly?" Alice said, looking displeased, hugging a teddy bear against her chest."I've been able to go out a bit lately. And playing mahjong is not a tough exercise."

Even though she had just told me that my plan of her taking my place was ridiculous, what had really bothered was the fact that I had left her out. She wanted to be involved in this as much as me. The problem was that her way of expressing it wasn't honest at all.

"It says we'll be starting tomorrow at 13:00. If it was nighttime it would be a different thing, but sunlight's really bad for you."

"U-uuuh! If the sky is as clouded as the day the dinosaurs became extinct I might be able to make it."

Yondaime flicked Alice's forehead. "Stop that, you idiot. Have you already forgotten about the time we played baseball? Weren't you ill for three whole days just for going to bat once?"

"I'm still in better shape than my assistant who is inferior to a monkey and can't even grab a tile without having his breath weakening because of his nervousness even while sitting down." No, I'm pretty sure I'm in better shape than you. "Listen, Yondaime. I think I've already told you this a while ago, but your sworn brother is so hopelessly optimistic that it's like tomatoes and cucumbers were growing inside his skull."

"I'm also pretty sure I told you this before, but your assistant has less sense of crisis than someone who climbs the Himalaya wearing

a short-sleeved T-shirt and pants."

Why are they both competing to see which one of them makes more fun of me?

"Anyway, since Alice can't go out and we can't cheat... I need to find a way to annihilate him so he'll lose his cash-"

"By the way," Alice interrupted. "Your father is here because he wants to make sure you're worthy of becoming Hinamura family's successor. If you win against him in a spectacular way, won't you intensify his tenacity?"

Yondaime made an expression that looked as if he had drank the coffee before the powder had entirely dissolved. "I don't give a damn. That's his own problem, I don't intend to inherit the business so it has nothing to do with me."

That made me remember something.

"Genichirou-san said there's another candidate for becoming the heir, and he couldn't decide if he should choose you or that person."

"...Another candidate?" Yondaime cocked his head. "I don't have any other close relatives, is it someone from the company? That anachronistic bastard is gonna let someone that's not from the family run the business? Hmm."

After muttering a 'Well, whatever. It has nothing to do with me', Yondaime looked at Alice and then at me once again.

"This is a formal request from me. Use whatever method you want. Think of a way to drive that stingy bastard to the wall."

We started by carefully watching the video Yondaime had brought, the footage from the security cameras from the day Genichirou-san beat me at the mahjong parlor.

"At the moment he cheats, his fingers are never caught on camera. That's important.", Alice pointed out.

"He steals tiles from the wall, no doubt about that, but he does it so spontaneously that I can't know exactly when he does it.", I said, remembering my dreadful experience. Genichirou-san's trick was stealing tiles from the pond--In short, it's a technique in which you pretend to take one of the piled up tiles that are facing downwards, but you actually steal one of the visible tiles discarded by the other players. There's no way a beginner can win against that.

Mahjong is a strange game. There are historical reasons, and also the influence of countless fiction works based on Asada Tetsuya's novel, but cheating actually tends to be tolerated. Well, it's more like cheating can be complimented despite being called a dirty tactic. Even if there's circumstantial evidence that tiles have been replaced, unless you get caught red-handed, the fraud won't be condemned, and they can even comment on how good your cheating was; it's that kind of environment.

"Does he use any other skills?", Alice asked Yondaime.

"Just stealing tiles, as far as I know."

"Well, that trick is effective with automatic tables. If he's able to successfully carry on that trick, there's no need to use riskier ones. Okay, what can be done? Since it's going to be held outside, we can't prepare a gadget to see the opponents' hand beforehand..."

Yes, if we were on a closed space, Major who is an expert in spying devices could place mini-cameras so we could see Genichirou-san's hand without him noticing, but since the match was arranged to be outside that was impossible to do. Hiding cameras on the riverbank, or installing super telephoto lens in the surrounding buildings would also be useless because we couldn't know where the tables would be nor where everyone would sit down until the day of the match. Genichirou-san would buy a brand new table and wouldn't open it until that day, so we couldn't alter the table either. And even if we could completely see his hand, in the first place mahjong is a game when one needs to have the right tiles to accumulate points, and Genichirou-san's skills were faster in that aspect too. How could we win? A plan not only to defend ourselves, but to win and take his cash--

".....Hm?"

I suddenly realized something and covered my mouth with one of my hands. Genichirou-san's quicker hand. Outdoor mahjong.

"What's the matter?" Yondaime slightly tilted his head. I raised my hand to stop him from talking and thought. Is it possible? Theoretically, it was. There were so many necessary things that it made me feel dizzy. Preliminary work, tactics to withstand until they fell into the trap, tactics to make sure they could effectively fall into the trap, and more than anything, coordination.

I finally came to, and I organized my thoughts. There were too many missing pieces, but I wasn't alone. Alice and Yondaime were here. So I made up my mind, gulped, and spoke:

"....Our side gets to decide the minor rules, right? In that case, there's some rules I'd like to add."

"What? Obviously Genichirou won't accept any rule that will only benefit us."

"No, there are special but impartial rules, because they're only related to the point exchange. Two rules."

"Speak."

"The first one is, we won't use chips, whoever wants to raise the bet will do it with cash."

Yondaime arched one of his eyebrows. "That's a disadvantage to me. Do you understand? Measuring out points with chips we can pay later so we can continue even if we exceed our cash halfway, but if we have an exact amount it will be all over once we spend it all."

"I understand, but it's necessary. Besides, if it doesn't sound advantageous to us it's more likely that Genichirou-san allows it."

Yondaime snorted and folded his arms. "And what's the other rule?"

"There won't be a 'father'. Everyone will earn dealer points."

"What the hell?" Yondaime ruffled his silver hair with his hand.

In mahjong, one of the players is the dealer or *father*, and that position rotates in each round. The dealer gets more payment if he wins and has to pay more if he loses; it's a high risk-high return position. But with my plan, everyone would be 'fathers'. Everyone would earn 1,5 more if they won and would have to pay double if they lost.

"Isn't that a disadvantage for us too?" Yondaime complained. "Well, whatever. I'll tell him. Now, explain that strategy of yours already. Why do we need those rules?"

I gulped and started talking, sitting at the edge of the bed. Alice's big eyes were getting more and more round and Yondaime was frowning more and more. When I finished explaining everything, Alice sighed and told Yondaime:

"I take back what I said a moment ago. Your sworn brother is nothing but a hopeless dreamer."

"You're right, that's a good way to describe your assistant." "You don't need to keep competing! We better hurry with our preparations!"

Yondaime sighed and removed his back from the wall. "True. It will be a disaster if we lose, so let's do this thoroughly. I'll talk to Major. So, Alice--" As he was walking to the door of the office, he pointed at the detective on the bed. "Think of a way to make him fall into the trap."

After the door closed, Alice glared at me from the corner of her eye, hugging his teddy bear to her chest and pressing her jaw into it.

"Is it impossible?", I asked, feeling anxious.

"It's not impossible. I have thought of a strategy, more or less... But it's a lost cause. You see?"

And with that, Alice started talking. Her strategy was as ridiculous as mine.

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In the clear winter sky, many kites of different colors could be seen, and the cheerful voices of the children could be heard on the riverbank.

"So nice, the kids are havin' fun...", Genichirou-san said with his eyes half-closed and his down jacket blowing in the wind.

"When Sou-chan was that age he ran outside everyday..." Rikako-san muttered by his side. As expected because of the cold, she was wearing a simple but thick coat, and her hair was tied in a bun.

"Stop blabbering. Start the preparations already.", Yondaime said, ill-humored.

Various men that one could realize with just a glance that they were yakuza took a huge box and some suitcases from inside a truck. Carefully unpacking, they arranged a simple automatic table, a small dynamo, four stools and two small desks on the surface covered with pebble and surrounded by overgrown grass. Our luggage was a bag that Pole was in charge to bring. A mountain of rolled bank notes were placed on the two desks. I had already seen 200.000.000 yens in cash with my own eyes some time ago, but it was still quite a sight. Pole's hands were shaking a little. Our cash was 160.000.000 yens. Almost all the cash Yondaime had on him had been already invested in business, so the bank notes in front of us had been loaned. Genichirou-san's side had more or less the same amount.

"Let's reconfirm the rules.", Genichirou-san said as he was setting up the mahjong table. "No chips, was it?"

The four sides of mahjong tables have slots than automatically open and close. That's where chips are normally put, but they were going to be empty that day because we were going to use the money on

that desk in front of us directly.

"So are ya really gonna be payin' in cash? Ya run out of money and yer done for."

"Shut the hell up. Worry about your own wallet." Yondaime cussed and Genichirou-san snorted. The money on their side wasn't necessarily all they had, but as for us, those rolled bank notes were our life line. We were really on the edge of the cliff.

"Next one, no father?" Genichirou-san took the yellow plate with the East wind sign and threw it to the cardboard box that served as a garbage bin. That plate is normally used to signal the dealer, but we wouldn't have to use it this day either.

"Such a weird rule. Does it mean that there ain't no parents and children relationships here anymore?" Genichirou-san laughed. That wasn't the reason I had made that rule, but maybe it was inevitable for him to interpret it like that. Yondaime just gave him a disdainful gesture. Well, in a way I was glad they had misunderstood, although Rikako-san's sad eyes made me a bit uneasy.

"Aight, ya guys get back to the car.", Genichirou-san turned to the men who had brought all the stuff. "And keep an eye on Souichirou's car, if someone comes, let me know."

Yondaime also talked to Pole: "You go back to the car too. Don't leave until the game is over."

"Understood!"

Only the four of us were left around the mahjong table. The voices of the children were now distant, and the sound that prevailed was the wind blowing against the grass.

What a strange situation, I found myself thinking, because if it was a bet involving money, I would generally be just an observer.

"Family mahjong!", Rikako-san said with a cheerful voice that sounded a little forced.

"Shall we begin?" Genichirou-san pressed the button on the table.

When you play mahjong in pairs, you have to sit in front of the person you're teaming up with, so I had Genichirou-san at my left and Rikako-san at my right.

As soon as we started, Genichirou-san noticed our strange way of playing.

"I was wonderin' what yer plan could be, but what's with this? Just child's play.", he said, laughing... And in the blink of an eye he earned 18000 points. With a sulky face, Yondaime transferred part of his money to the other desk.

Our plan didn't change by the next round. This time, Rikako-san won with the maximum amount of points.

"Just as the Thirteen Orphans are called *matchless*, what ya guys are doing should be called *useless*..." Rikako-san smiled. "But, ya two really get along, that's nice!"

Genichirou-san himself was an opponent to worry about, but Rikako-san was also quite dangerous. In just two rounds, they had practically seen through our objective.

However, that was part of the strategy that Alice had taught us.

"Aiming to Thirteen Orphans in all rounds..."

Two nights before, Alice had explained.

"It might seem ridiculous, but it's a strategy that has worked in several tournaments."

Thirteen Orphans is a winning hand in which you need a tile of each one of the dragons and the winds, the tiles 1 and 9 of each suit, and an extra tile of any other terminal or honor tile. Non-dealers would win 32.000 points with this hand, but since with our rules everyone had 'father' points, everyone would win 48.000. That means that if you had this tiles, you would obtain the maximum

amount of points.

"This tactic has three advantages. First, of course, is the high amount of points. The second one is that in case you can't seem to obtain a favorable hand, it's easier to get an unusual evasive hand."

In any case, many tiles would be discarded during the second half of the first round, reducing the danger of making the opponent win. In theory, it's a perfect defensive-offensive tactic. In practice, that hand is hard to come by, so even if you aim to get it in all the rounds, the opportunity might just come once. Even so, we chose that strategy.

"The third advantage is-" Alice smiled at me. "It's the tactic that fits the best with the plan you thought of, of course."

For that reason, Yondaime and I focused on the disposable tiles, and Mr. and Mrs. Hinamura kept winning. The bank notes on Yondaime's desk were quickly decreasing. The idea of paying directly in cash that I had suggested myself was difficult to stand mentally. Each one of Genichirou-san's winning hands was worth around the same amount a normal person earns in a whole year.

Where on earth is the 'family mahjong'?, I thought to myself. My fingertips had numbed. The usually talkative Genichirou-san had fallen completely silent when Yondaime's money was reduced to half. Rikako-san's usual happy expression had turned gloomy.

Why is this happening even though they're linked by blood? Even knowing they would destroy their ties and each other, they calmly kept doing it.

An hour later, our funds were already at their limit. The money on Yondaime's desk could be counted with just a glance, while the money on Genichirou-san's side was a high mountain that looked like it was about to collapse.

"Oh well. Everythin' will be over next round...", Genichirou-san said, looking at Yondaime from the corner of his eye.

"It's cold, so I can't wait to go back and take a bath..."

"Quit blabbering. I still have 200,000,000 stored.", Yondaime answered in an unfriendly way. He was actually just bluffing, but the look on Genichirou-san's face changed. As soon as the next round began, I understood that he had accepted Yondaime's taunt.

The discarded tiles that were lined up on the table were disappearing one by one without us noticing. He had started doing his special cheating skill, stealing from the pond. Rikako-san apparently noticed to and immediately started aligning tiles so they were easier to steal. Genichirou-san was aiming to do Thirteen Orphans. He started preparing his double yakuman. If he showed us his Thirteen Orphans he would take all of my points or Yondaime's with one of the tiles that we had discarded. If by some twist he'd won with a tile taken by himself it would also be the end. Only a couple of millions were left on Yondaime's desk anyway.

Even in the cold wind of January, my fingertips holding the tiles were sweaty. If I lost that opportunity I would simply die. Only the tiles would tell. I desperately checked which tiles had disappeared.

Three tiles until Genichirou-san's hand is complete.

Now's the time.

I took off my jacket and put it behind the stool. That was the signal. Nothing changed around the table. There was just the sound of the wind and the tiles clacking. The person who had to interpret my signal from above had to notice my deep red T-shirt.

Genichirou-san stole another tile.

Only two more left.

One more left.

Hearing the wind in my ears, I slowly adjusted the coordination of my next move.

Genichirou-san announced tenpai. Without a doubt, it was going to be the Thirteen Orphans.

Yondaime discarded his last tile without giving it a second thought. End of the turn.

At that moment-

An intermittent sound made itself audible from far away among the sound the wind. Genichirou-san stopped his extended arm for an instant and frowned. But he didn't know that sound was the rotor of a helicopter, and he didn't know the fate that sound would carry either. Genichirou-san's stopped hand got close to the mountain of tiles again, and the sound of the rotor and its blades cutting through the air was now just above our heads. Rikako-san raised her head with a darkened expression. Just when Genichirou-san was about to exchange his Green Dragon tile with one of the discarded ones, a huge shadow surrounded the mahjong table and the four of us. The surrounding grass shook violently and a whirl of wind was formed. The helicopter was flying so low that it looked like it was going to crush us. Then the hatch opened, and a backlit short human silhouette stuck out his upper body. Said silhouette was holding a long, rod-shaped object--The barrel of an M14 assault rifle. Another sound soon followed, even louder than rotor. It was, without a doubt, a gunshot. At the same time, Genichirou-san sprang up from his chair, but his next action was something that I couldn't have predicted. He grabbed Yondaime, who was sitting at his right, by the shoulders, and pushed him to the ground. I heard the sound of

sand scattering at one side of the table. The noise of the rotor grew gradually distant and the shadow over us became smaller and smaller until it disappeared, but my heart was still pounding heavily inside my chest, and I felt the dry, cold wind brushing my ears once again.

"...What on earth was that?" Rikako-san wondered out loud, unburying her head from under her arms and standing up from her chair to look up at the sky.

"A hitman from somewhere...? But he went away without doin' anythin'..."

Yondaime stood up and patted the dust from his sleeves, speaking in a very clear voice:

"It was a bad prank from a friend... Just discard that tile you were about to discard."

Still holding the Green Dragon in his hand, Genichirou-san stared at the table's surface. It was then when he finally understood anything. And he started laughing, his shoulders shaking.

"I see. It was for this. It was all for this. Not usin' chips, and not havin' a dealer... It was all for this reason."

I firmly swallowed and lowered my gaze to my tiles. Yes, everything had been prepared for this very moment.

Still standing up, Genichirou-san placed the Green Dragon tile on the table. I felt my body drenched in sweat and my eardrums pounding.

"Ron."

Trying to control the shaking in my hands, I turned my tiles, showing them.

"...Thirteen Orphans--Double Yakuman."

Rikako-san blinked, showing a surprised expression. "...W-what's this, what's goin' on? Gen-chan?"

"Ya'll understand by just lookin'." With a transparent smile, Genichirou-san looked at the table. "When I panicked and stood up, the boy turned the table itself around."

I wiped the sweat off my hands on my jeans. It was just like Genichirou-san had said. When they both got distracted by the helicopter, *I turned the table 90 degrees counter-clockwise.* Genichirou-san now had Yondaime's hand, full of useless tiles, and the hand with the Thirteen Orphans that had been obtained through his cheating tactics was now mine. The dangerous rule of paying the bets with cash, and the no-dealer rule, I made them both for the sake of this plan. Since no one would have individual chips, nothing would be signaling the points of each player, so they wouldn't be direct evidence that the table had been turned around. Just looking at the dramatic change in the tiles, the circumstantial evidence was incredible, but there was no concrete proof to blame me of cheating. That was this strange game's unspoken rule.

The greatest contributor to this incredible trap weren't me or Alice, but the one who had to see my signal, Major, who was able to perfectly coordinate the moment when he had to fly above us with the helicopter.

Yondaime let out a sigh.

"It's over..." His voice somewhat sounded like that of a tired lost child who was on the verge of tears.

"Let me ask ya one more thing." Sprawling in the chair and stretching both of his legs, Genichirou-san spoke in a calm tone.

"What?"

"I bought this table brand new. Since it's round and monopod, it's light and easy to turn around, but what if it had been a table difficult to move?"

Yondaime glanced at me for a moment and then lowered his gaze.

"Tokyo is my familiar territory. You said so yourself, didn't you?"

Genichirou-san slightly tilted his head, and Yondaime continued talking without raising his gaze.

"Very few storekeepers can deliver a mahjong table in just two days. I contacted all of them and bought all the tables from them, except the ones of this type."

That's how money is used. You were the one who taught me that, you idiot.--*When Yondaime muttered this, the velvet surface where the mahjong tiles and Genichirou-san's legs were resting shook a little.* I will never forget the smile that appeared on Genichirou-san's face at that moment.

"Between the charter of the helicopter and buyin' all those tables, didncha exceed the budget quite a bit?"

"Shut the hell up. None of your business. Worry about your own deficit. If you don't have the cash, then write an IOU right here and now. Put the annual interest rate on the bankruptcy of the third generation of the Hinamura family."

"Ah yeah, that..." Genichirou-san turned his gaze to my double yakuman. "A dealer double yakuman is worth 96.000 points, so it's 480.000.000 yens, huh? 160.000.000 ain't enough."

I didn't know if I should speak or not, but in the end the words came off from my throat to my lips.

"Ehmm. Non-dealer is fine."

Yondaime and Genichirou-san looked at me at the same time. For a second, their faces looked exactly the same.

"It doesn't have to be a dealer score. Non-dealer score is 64.000 points."

"Why?"

"Just before, when the guy in the helicopter pointed his rifle, you covered Yondaime..."

Yondaime showed his teeth.

"I'm sorry. That guy is actually one of our companions, Major. And of course, that rifle was just a model gun to distract you. But, you protected Yondaime."

"Dunno, I don't remember doin' that." "What's with that selective memory!"

But I had understood already. Regardless of all the hateful things they had said to each other--

"Genichirou-san, you truly think of Yondaime as your son. I'm Yondaime's sworn brother, that means that in a way I'm also your son. So, it's 64.000 points. The money on that desk is enough."

Alice had also told me. The family is the smallest social union in which everything can be forgiven. I have nothing more than a broken family, so from the bottom of my heart, I thought: I don't want to see them covering each other in debts like that. This battlefield in which we had fought for millions of yens hadn't been exactly the cleanest fight, but still...

Genichirou-san didn't even try to conceal his laughter. Yondaime made a sulky face and looked away. Rikako-san grabbed my arm and Yondaime's with both of her hands, pulling us closer.

"Yer both my kids! I love ya!"

"Shut up!" Yondaime brushed his mother's hand off.

"Souichirou, ya okay with that stupid thing he just said?" Genichirou-san chuckled as he pointed at me. Yondaime turned his back to us.

"He was the one who raised the bet.", he started walking, making his way through the overgrown grass. "Do as you please."

*

Genichirou-san called me two days after the mahjong match, just when Yondaime had came to the Detective Agency to discuss how to manage the troublesome accounting process. How could he launder 160.000.000 yens obtained through a gambling bet? In the middle of the conversation, my cellphone rang. The screen displayed an unknown number.

"...Hello?"

"Boy? We're goin' back to Osaka. Thought I'd say goodbye."

I could only hear his voice, but his smile surfaced immediately in my mind. Genichirou-san. I nervously looked at Yondaime for a second and went to the kitchen so he that he wouldn't hear our conversation.

"Eeh, uhm, uhhh.... Thank you for your hard work." I didn't know what else to say. "How do you know my number-?"

"Did some research. I know Souichirou's number too, but he'd get all grumpy if I called him."

Probably, buy why would he call *me*? What did he want to talk about? A noise was heard on the other side of the line, followed by a cheerful female voice.

"Naru-chan? It's me, it's mom! It's a bit sad but we're goin' back to Osaka like good losers. Take good care of Sou-chan! By the way, he's there with ya ain't he? Sou-chaaaaaan ya hear me!? Mom loves ya a ton!!"

I distanced my phone around 40 centimeters away from my ear. Wow, he's really going to hear at this rate.

"Stop makin' a fuss, ya idiot. Give it back."

When I heard Genichirou-san's voice, I brought the phone to my ear again.

"Well, it's been fun. 'Til now, nothing interesting had happened whenever I came to Tokyo, but it was nice meetin' ya, boy. Let's play mahjong together again some other time."

"No no no. I've had enough with mahjong. Please give me a break."

"Hey, have ya forgotten already?" Genichirou-san's voice turned cold, just like it was when he was sitting at my right at the riverbed. "The one who stole my Thirteen Orphans wasn't Souichirou but ya, boy. Ya'll have to let me take revenge on ya. Give me a call whenever ya visit Osaka."

I think I've decided to never go to Osaka in my life.

"Ahh yeah, by the way" Genichirou-san's normal tone of voice returned. "Tell Souichirou that there's no way I'm gonna let someone who hangs out with such a naive, simpleton sworn little brother become the Hinamura family's successor. He can keep bein' a NEET in Tokyo 'till he drops dead if he wants to. I decided to pick the other candidate."

"Huh..."

I raised my head to look up at the dark roof. Everything turned out okay in the end... So it seems. That comment he made was insensitive, though.

Genichirou-san hung up after a 'see ya', and I timidly walked back to the room. Yondaime glared at me, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"What did that damn yakuza want?"

Well, it was obvious he was going to notice.

"Aah... Ehm, well...."

When I told him that Genichirou-san had decided to choose the other successor, a complicated expression appeared on his face, as if the saliva inside his mouth had turned sour.

"What the heck. The other successor? He should have chosen that one from the start instead of making all this big fuss. What did that idiot couple come from, really?"

At that moment, Alice who was in her bed chuckled, her shoulders shaking.

"As I said, Mr. and Mrs. Hinamura came here to visit the shrine. Everything else was secondary."

Yondaime knitted his brows and cocked his head, looking at Alice. "To visit the shrine?"

"That's right. Narumi, do you remember what shrine did they want to go?"

The sudden turn of the conversation confused me.

"Ahh... Uh, If I remember correctly, Suitengu?"

Alice nodded.

"Yes. Suitengu shrine at Nihonbasho is famous in Japan as a place to pray for a childbirth without any complications."

Yondaime and I probably looked at Alice with the same surprised face.

"...C-childbirth?"

"Hinamura Rikako is probably pregnant. The other candidate to become the heir would be the child inside her womb."

Yondaime stood up with a completely astonished look on his face, snatching my phone away from me and redialing from the call history.

"It's me. ...You bastard, why didn't you say anything!? About mother, is she really going to have another brat? Aah? You're out of your mind, idiot! ....*The charms of a pregnant woman?* No, why the hell would I know about that? That's disgusting, so shut up! Hey, bastard, where are you now? I hear some kind of announcement on

the background. Haneda? You imbecile, what are you thinking? She's not even in the stable period of her pregnancy yet, why are you going by plane? Take the bullet train! She's forty-three years old, she might look young but she's still an old bat, it's surprising that she's pregnant in the first place! ...No, I'm not complimenting you because of that, stupid! ...Aah? What are you talking about? ...Soujirou? *Soujirou*? You idiot, what if it's a girl? A name is for life so think about it more seriously! Ah, and don't do anything stupid with inheriting the business and all that. Learn a bit of what happened with me!"

His way of talking was so scary that I was getting worried that he would break my phone. I was still bewildered and could only exchange absent looks between Alice's long hair and Yondaime being a victim of teasing on the phone.

I see, they came to Tokyo to visit the shrine. Alice casually mentioned it some time ago.

"If I had explained it from the beginning, you see, since Hinamura Souichirou is actually such a kind man..." Alice chuckled. "I think he wouldn't have fought as seriously as he did."

The detective's maliciousness dilemma, I suppose.

During fifteen more minutes, Alice and I continued listening while sitting on the bed to the manzai routine between father and son. We could only hear the tsukkomi, but it was incredibly easy to imagine what the boke lines were. Probably because of Yondaime's Osakan blood.

*

Three days later after school, I was called by Yondaime to show up at Hirasaka-gumi's office.

"Send this to Rikako on your name.", Yondaime said, putting a small cardboard box in front of me.

"...Why don't you send it yourself?" I knew it was because he was too shy to do it, but I still wanted to hear his reply. Maybe I am as malicious as Alice.

"Shut up. Just send it. And don't look inside the package."

If you tell me that, I can't help but open the box as soon as I get home. I have something called curiosity. Also, I have to write what the product is in the voucher of the express home delivery company.

Inside the box, there was a sash made of silk with a splendid design of a wolf embroidered with festive-colored threads. It was a bellyband. With just looking at it, one could tell it was handmade. So far, I haven't seen anyone else capable of making such a perfect embroidery in such a short time. Since female dogs give birth without complications, they're used as a symbol to pray for a safe childbirth. Suitengu at the center of Japan has a Day of the Dog, honoring pregnant women, that has extended all over the country. I apologized around ten times to Yondaime in my heart and put the sash back in its package. When I was writing 'To Hinamura Rikako-sama' and the address, I started thinking about Hinamura Souichirou's soon-to-be-born little brother who would be 21 years younger than him. I wonder if he would be consider my sworn brother too. She might be a sister.

Someday, when that child grows up, it would be nice if the four blood-related members of the Hinamura family would sit together around the kotatsu with a mahjong board. They wouldn't play for money, but for something trivial like who would get to use the remote control. That's what family mahjong really is.

*

On the weekend, I finally showed up at the mahjong parlor Tenhou Club again. I had been prioritizing my schoolwork so once the winter break had ended I hadn't been concerned with all the

mahjong bears matter, but after the problem with Genichirou-san came to an end I thought I couldn't let that other matter unsolved forever, so I went to see how things were going.

"Ah-, Fujishima-san, thank you for your work." The punch-permed delinquent manager greeted me. I wish he wasn't so formal, because a young employee that didn't know I was a regular customer kept giving me suspicious looks, but he let me enter the office and even served me tea.

"The guys from Hirasaka-Gumi told me about what happened with Sou-san's father and all that. Must have been though."

"Ah, haha, haa, yeah well..." I'm sure those idiots in back T-shirts said something exaggerated.

"But you're really something, Fujishima-san, undergoing a 60-40 sake ritual with a yakuza boss from Kansai..."

"That's a lie!" I knew they would say something like that!

"But yeah, since it was Sou-san's father, he was clearly unrelated to the mahjong bears..."

I nodded. "If he hadn't been unrelated, it would have been unmanageable for Yondaime and I."

The manager also smiled bitterly.

"Certainly, that person's so strong that he's like a monster. Compared to him, these other guys are just kids. They're just strong enough to make easy money."

"Ahh, have those guys came recently?" I asked. The manager scratched his chin.

"Yesterday, that guy who wears glasses and is as skinny as a burdock came. But he just played for a round. He hadn't been showing up at all at the other parlors lately. I was thinking it would be nice if they just disappeared altogether, but..."

"He won big and went home yesterday too?"

"Midway through, he started winning by continuously making tsumo, but he suddenly looked ill, like he was about to puke, and went home."

He showed me the footage from the security camera. Since it was a hidden camera, the image wasn't too clear, but I could still see one of the three suspicious customers. His figure was weird because despite the heat inside the parlor, he was still wearing a jumper. The way he moved was somewhat scary.

"Fujishima-san, are those guys really a group? Not even once have they entered the parlor together..."

"Probably... Because they do the same strange things when they play. For example, here", and I pointed at the footage. "On his turn, he has a pair of number 1 circle suit tiles and a pair of West winds, Dama-Ten on his eight turn. You can see he has four number 2 circle suit tiles. There's no way he would keep his number 1 tiles."

"Certainly."

The conversation with the manager was quick. *"Something tells you to keep the right tiles"* sounds like something out of a mahjong manga, and the actual situation was more like *"when you're playing, you have to get rid of the tiles that won't help you win first."* When you play Shogi, once you're checkmated there's nothing you can do to avoid it, no matter how good you are. But a skilled player won't let the circumstances lead him to get checkmated, and will probably lead his opponent to checkmate. Mahjong's the same. Yet, if someone could avoid being checkmated, that would be--

"I wonder what kind of trick is he using.", the manager murmured. "I also looked carefully if there was someone spying from a window or something, but..."

"He probably looks at the tiles' flaws."

My words made the manager knit his brows.

"No way. We don't use those kind of cheap tiles here."

That trick consists on telling the tiles apart because of their small

cracks and so. There's also people who do their own marks to the tiles. Of course, even knowing how to tell just some of the tiles apart is still overwhelmingly advantageous.

"But I can't think of anything else. Keeps losing but starts winning halfway through, constantly making tsumo, seeing through the probabilities with the double pairs, and all that..."

When I exited the parlor together with the manager, I checked all the tiles that had been used by the skinny glasses guy from yesterday.

"They're as good as new, you see? I even buy new tiles to replace the old ones quite often.", the manager said as he stroked one of the brand new tiles in his hand with a finger.

The feeling that something just wasn't right was curdling in my stomach. I took the number 1 suit tile, thoroughly scanning it. I felt like I had already experienced this same feeling that something wasn't right before. But, it's impossible--

I stood up, still holding that tile, and walked to the counter. I borrowed a water-based sign pen from the employee and scribbled over the back of the tile.

"....Ah....."

A dry groan escaped from my throat.

A transparent part that couldn't be scribbled over with the ink surfaced on the tile.

I ran back to the board to check the other three number 1 suit tiles. They all had the same sign.

"....Fujishima-san? That's...."

I interrupted the manager's words by standing up once again. The toilet. The other strange thing about those guys was how they often went to the toilet. I rushed to the toilet and crawled on the tiled floor and looked under the washbasin and the urinals.

And then I found it. Under the water closet, there was a red fine powder.

I couldn't breath for a moment. Unable to get up yet for some reason, I held onto the wall of the private room. Finally, I supported myself with the urinal and got up.

I took out my cellphone. My hands were shaking so bad that I almost dropped it.

What the hell is this? It can't be.

Why are you here? Why are you still here!? Weren't you supposed to have been reduced to ashes, withered, vanished without a trace already?

My throat was trembling. The bitter taste, the taste of blood and the electrifying pleasure came back to my mind. Even though it should have all remained deeply sunken. Now, the memories of the pain, the fever, the singing voice were all gushing out, overflowing like wounds throughout my body. Yet, my thoughts were eerily calm. The first person I called wasn't Yondaime or Alice, it was Major.

"...Ah, it's me. Please come to Tenhou Club. Oh, and, you have tools to pick up a spilled drug from the floor, don't you? ...Yeah. ....Uhm, err, it's a powder. It's an extremely small quantity. ...Yes, yes.... Please, I want you to examine it as soon as you can."

My request of having him examine it immediately was probably involuntary. I wanted my conjecture to be proven wrong. That's why I thought about Mayor first. After hanging up, I took a deep breath, and this time I called Yondaime.

"I'm at Tenhou Club. ...Yeah, it's about the mahjong case. ...I think I might have understood those guys' modus operandi. Using the toilet... Yes. ...No, it's still just a theory, but it's probably--"

I bit my lip, feeling unable to breath, resting my back on the wall, and I glanced down, looking at the filthy, dim red under the urinal. It's not a conjecture. I know it even know. My body remembers it more than anything.

"--Angel Fix."

Chapter 2

Hakamizaka Shirou.

He was born as the son of a Gunma's second generation Diet member. Eight years ago, he enrolled into T Pharmaceutical University. When he was 19, he went studying abroad to Iran. That's where it all started for him, when he happened to encounter a mutation of a poppy flower. No one can know what name did he give to that flower anymore.

When he returned home, he extracted and purified an alkaloid from that flower, making a new psychotropic drug. That drug that could make you see angels and hear the music from Heaven, those pills with wings carved on them, were scattered on the streets we lived in.

Unlike the sorrowful flower that served as the raw material, people actually knew the name of the drug.

Angel Fix.

“I wonder why he named it that...”

Holding that deceased person's printed data, I asked Alice that question. The girl on the bed turned her face from the faint light of the countless monitors.

“This is a very unpleasant guess, but...”

Alice started talking with a voice colder than the conditioned air.

“It's probably taken from a James Tiptree Jr. short story. It seems like that man, Hakamizaka Shirou, had the same strange tastes as me.”

“...Is it a story about narcotics?”

“No. It's a story about aliens who take only good people with them

to another world. It's a wonderful story, but I don't really know if he thought about it that far."

Sighing, I threw the data to the bed.

Anyhow, Hakamizaka wanted to be taken by the angels. Most of his companions have also died from overdosing, so his thoughts will remain in the dark for all eternity.

It should have ended that way. Everything should have died out already.

"Two people survived."

Alice's mutterings made me raise my head.

"Don't you remember? From the seven people of the group in charge of manufacturing and selling Angel Fix, five of them died in the hospital after the incident. But two of them survived."

Two people.

I knew one of them. Shinozaki Toshio—Ayaka's older brother.

"Tetsu went to talk to Toshi. The other person is Chigasawa Teruhiko. Yondaime is going to find his whereabouts."

"...To ask them if there are leftovers of the drug, right?"

"It would be good if it's just that."

Saying that, Alice turned her back on me and started typing on the keyboard.

"What do you mean?"

"It's been a year since then. Why has Angel fix appeared now, after a whole year? If those mahjong bears just found a stock by chance, it will be okay once that stock is used up completely."

I understood what Alice was trying to say. The season would change, the flowers would bloom, their petals would scatter and

they would finally bear fruit. Maybe someone was manufacturing it again: That's what she meant.

I shivered and felt goosebumps, so I rubbed both of my arms with my hands.

That red powder I had asked Major to examine was indeed Angel Fixed. My wishful thinking had been useless, and the nightmare was still stuck somewhere in the darkness.

“There's a big possibility that the mahjong group is in contact with the manufacturer group.”

Letting my eyes wander, I nodded at Alice's voice.

Those guys cheated by marking the back of the tiles with a transparent ink. They kept winning at the parlor because of that. They probably stuck the ink with their fingertips. What a time-consuming underhanded trick.

Angel Fix greatly enhanced their visual sensitivity. In that world where one could see angels, a mark that should be colorless and transparent rose to the surface, guiding them. That special ink was probably the same ink that was used by the people who sold the Fix directly during that incident a year ago. What kind of connection do they have?

Possibly the mahjong bears weren't the only ones on the move, the manufacturer group too. Why did they start breaking into mahjong parlors this time?

I don't understand. There's not enough information.

“Right now, there's nothing we can do.”, Alice muttered. “We won't have enough information unless we found the group of manufacturers or the mahjong bears. We'll have to wait for Hirasaka-gumi's results.”

I squatted on the cold floor and stared at Alice's dimly lit back, asking her yet another question.

“Shouldn't we leave this to the police?”

“Yondaime and Tetsu won't allow that.”

Without turning her back, Alice answered me with a dry voice.

“Have you forgotten? Fix is a bitter enemy for those two. They're not taking part on this for profit, but for their anger and their honor.”

I nodded.

A Fix addict once stabbed one of Yondaime's underlings. Tetsu-senpai once lost one of his friends because of the drug. However, there was also another deeper and more ambiguous reason. Those red angel wings had corrupted the lives of the NEETs of this city—outcasts just like Senpai and Yondaime, that in a way were like siblings to them.

Senpai and Yondaime didn't blame the people who reached out their hands to the drug on their weakness or stupidity. If the cycle changed only slightly, the darkness they would fell into would probably be themselves. Maybe they even wanted to rescue Hakamizaka Shirou. But that was beyond their power, so they could only keep running... To the angels.

“So, do you intend to poke your nose into this again?”

Alice's voice finally had a little bit of feeling in it. An ill-humored feeling.

“Don't tell me to retreat.”

“Hmph. It's pointless, so I won't say it.” Alice puffed out her cheeks. “Meddle all you want. With your learning abilities, I'm sure that if you were burnt to death and then reborn as a chicken, you'd gladly jump into an oven.”

I scratched my head.

“But, aren't you the same, Alice?”

“What-!?” Alice sprang up on the bed and quickly faced my way. The mountain of stuffed toys crumbled.

“No, I mean, don't you get involved no matter how dangerous some things are? It's the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it?”

“I do not do that kind of stupid things, if I had to look for something in the fire, I'd make sure to use pliers!”

“Then, those 'pliers' would be me, right?”

Alice froze for a few seconds with her mouth half open.

“I was thinking it was unusual for you to try to win an argument against me, but just now the grip on your fists disappeared inside your heart, didn't it?”

She trembled and spoke in a spiteful way, with her cheeks flushed.

“Not true.”, I lied. I wasn't thinking about disproving her, though.

“But what are you saying? That sounds like I'm leaving all the dangerous things in your hands while I shut myself in a safe place, doesn't it-!?”

“It's not like that... Okay, maybe it *is* like that, but, ahh... Uhm, you see”

I outstretched my hands to calm the furious Alice down and chose my words.

“It's fine that way. I think you and I are fine like this.”

“What's fine?”

“You're worried because I always end up at the crime scene, but you know-” “I'm not worried, I'm just amazed!” “Don't you occasionally show up there too? That's really worrisome.”

“M-mh?”

Alice hugged her teddy bear, leaving only her eyes unhidden.

“So, let me handle all the dangerous stuff. I'm happy to do that for you, because I'm your assistant.”

She stamped both white sock-clad feet.

“Limit those embarrassing lines of yours to your poorly written chronicles!”

“Embarrassing, why? I'm just saying that for your sake I--”

“Idiot! Don't repeat it!”

Alice hid herself under her mountain of stuffed toys. It was a little fun to see her, though I really didn't understand what part of what I said was so embarrassing, but then Dr Pepper cans started flying, so I decided to leave that matter alone already.

When I finished picking up the empty cans, I left the Detective Agency. The quickly setting sun of the winter afternoon was awfully bright.

“Fujishima-kun, you skipped the afternoon class again!”

When I went down the emergency stairs, the kitchen door of the ramen shop I was in front of opened, and light brown hair and lifted eyebrows came in sight. Ayaka appeared in front of me, tying up a black apron to her hips.

“Shouldn't you be careful with your attendance? What if you repeat the year?”

“U-uhmm? I have my absences well calculated, so it's okay.”, I lied.

That's right, it's the third term already. At this rate, I won't be able to become a third year student. It was just that the results of the investigation of the powder would come out today and I wanted to know it as soon as possible, so I ended up skipping all the afternoon classes.

“I was absent during most of the first term, but I already caught up!” Ayaka puffed out her chest with pride. That made me feel taken aback, and my body stiffened.

Yes, from January of last year, Ayaka spent four months slumbering in a hospital bed. Vegetative state. Not only those four months were stolen away from her, but also all of her memories.

Angel Fix.

Those angel wings had harmed her, hurt her.

She would no longer be able to remember. That's why when Ayaka asked “Are you getting into something troublesome again?”, I spoke deceiving words naturally, surprising even myself.

“Yeah, something like that. Yondaime earned quite a lot with that mahjong matter, so he has to launder that money... Ayaka, do you know what money laundering means?”

“No clue.” Ayaka hit her temples with her index fingers and rolled her eyes.

“Oh. Well, anyway, it seems like Yondaime really needs a hand. I can't tell you much more than that.”

“That's fine, but...”

There was some surprise mixed in Ayaka's tone, and that made me feel relieved. Surprise is always good. Since what I said wasn't a complete lie, and in fact about 80% of it was the truth, my lie went smoothly. *I've been lying quite a lot lately*, I thought. I really didn't feel good about deceiving Ayaka.

“So it's not particularly detective work, is it? You *could* come to class, right?”

“Ah-- Well, yeah...”

Right, I did say something like that originally.

“Everyone in class were talking about how you're going to become our kouhai and started discussing how they should greet you when they run into you on the corridors! That's so mean.”

Yes, that *is* mean, so don't tell me about it.

“I wonder if I should just drop out now...”

“What are you saying? No, don't!” Ayaka hit my arm. “At least keep going until the end of the term... The homeroom teacher always goes through the trouble of collecting the prints to hand them over to you and all that...”

“I can just pick them up the next day, so isn't it okay?”

“Not if you completely skip that next day!”

I curled up.

“And someone from the Student Council was looking for you today. You weren't there, so she was very troubled.”

“Student Council?”

“You're also in the Student Council, I didn't know.”

“Aah....” Right. She didn't know I had joined the Inspection Committee. The person looking for me was probably the head of the committee, Kousaka Yukari-senpai. “A petite, rabbit-like girl?”

“Yes, exactly. She was with a girl with long hair that was wearing a headband showing her forehead. They said they were from the Student Council.”

Kaoruko-senpai too? That kinda makes want to vanish from the school completely. Well, it's not like I hate her or anything like that, but she's so stern that I can't really deal with her.

“It seems like they wanted to ask you favor, so go to school tomorrow and show up at the Student Council, okay?”

“Okay...”

“And Sayuri-sensei said that she wanted to help us studying again. I'm also still doing pretty bad, but let's do our best so we can graduate together!”

“Yeah, let's, I guess.”

“I can't hear you!”

“Let's do our best...”

Ayaka firmly raised her thumb and then went back to the kitchen.

I sat on the bear crate and looked up at the winter sky, sighing.

So, getting my head filled with concern about narcotics in a mahjong parlor is easier for me than worrying about studying for high school... This is a serious illness already.

*

The next day during the lunch break, I showed up at the Student Council room. The number of people in the Student Council had increased since the last time I had been there, so there was a lot of unfamiliar faces. Looking at their class lapel badges, I noticed there were a lot of first year students. Neither Kousaka-senpai nor Kaoruko-senpai were there.

“Fujishima-senpai!” The short girl with short hair who was sitting closest to the door eating her bento looked my way and sprang up. “You came all the way here!”

She ran up to me, so I stepped back to the corridor.

“You left early yesterday, what happened? Were you feeling bad? Are you okay already?”

“Eh? Y-yeah... They told me someone was looking for me.”

“Ah, that would be me.”

Eh? Wasn't it Kousaka-senpai? Well, this girl is certainly small, and Ayaka didn't ask me about my abstract 'rabbit-like' description... Was it because of that rabbit-shaped barrette?

At that moment, someone who was sitting in a desk further into the room got up and ran up to us. She was a long-haired first year student.

“Chinatsu, Fujishima-senpai is here?”, the long-haired girl said, and then she pushed the girl with the rabbit barrette aside and went out to the corridor. When her gaze met mine, she made a sullen face.

“You're in the Inspection Committee but you don't show up at all, what are you thinking!?”

She suddenly thrust her finger in front of me, so I bent backwards.

“Kaya-chan, he finally came here, so don't be mad...” The short-haired girl nervously interposed.

“You're the head of the committee, do something about it!”

“Kaya-chan, you're not even in the Inspection committee, so there's no reason for you to be mad...”

“I'm the Student Council president, so it's my duty to oversee everything!”

Student Council president. Is she the Student Council president? I see, just as Ayaka said, she was a girl with long hair and a headband, showing her forehead.

Right, both Kaoruko-senpai and Kousaka-senpai have long retired already to fully concentrate on their university entrance examinations. I borrowed the power of the Student Council a few times because of an incident at the end of the year, so I was under the impression that I would still see those two there.

Hereupon, this girl called Chinatsu was now the head of the Inspection committee. She gave out a similar aura to that of Kousaka-senpai.

She hesitatingly spoke to the student council president:

“We have a favor to ask Fujishima-senpai, so--”

“Chinatsu, be quiet.” the president said flatly. My jaw dropped at the intense feeling of deja vu.

I was dragged to the Inspection room that was beside the Student Council room. There was no one in that room. It was surrounded by coarse steel shelves, and the heat didn't reach, so it was also unpleasantly cold.

“By the way, Fujishima-senpai, you really don't remember us, huh.”

Saying that, the president glared at me.

“Eeh, well....”

I've seen them before somewhere, right?

“I see. It's just like Hayano-senpai said. He just doesn't care about anything or anyone related to school.”

'Hayano' is the former Student Council president, Kaoruko-senpai. Seems like there's no decent comments about me at all...

“Senpai only came to help out at the Inspection room once last year!” Chinatsu-chan said, looking like she was about to cry. “Even though Kousaka-senpai took the trouble to introduce us! Even though you gave me your autograph!” I'm sorry, my memory is bad... Wha- Autograph!?

“I'm Kenzaki.”, the Student Council president said in a sullen manner. “Kenzaki Kayako. The Student Council President. And this is the head of the Inspection committee, Ayukawa Chinatsu. She's your superior, so at least remember her name, please.”

“I'm Ayukawa! Don't forget anymore, okay?”

I looked at them and nodded faintly, thinking about what should I say in response.

“...You're both first years. Isn't it tough to be the president and the head of a committee?”

“Second year students like Fujishima-senpai are unreliable.”, Kenzaki-san replied immediately, not losing her chance to criticize me again.

“Kaya-chan, this isn't the time to be bullying senpai... The main problem, the main problem!”, Chinatsu-chan grabbed Kenzaki-san's arm.

Kenzaki-san cleared her throat and looked at me again.

“You're right. I'm sorry, senpai.”

“D-don't worry... But, main problem?”

“Senpai, do you deal with compensated dating?”

“...Excuse me-!?” I unintentionally let out a weird cry.

“Wait, Kaya-chan, don't ask it like that!”

“Be quiet, Chinatsu.”, Kenzaki-san pushed the short-haired head aside. “Fujishima-senpai, you have connections with a gangster organization, so you must manage many love hotels, clubs, karaokes and the like, right?”

I looked up at the two dust-stained fluorescent lamps on the ceiling. *Instead of repeating the year, I should just quietly drop out*, I decided in my heart. I don't want to be thrown into these weird rumors for an extra year.

“Err... It's nothing like that. I'm just a high school student.”

“But Chinatsu said--” Kenzaki-san glared at Chinatsu-chan who was by her side.

“I-I didn't say that! I only said that Fujishima-senpai was the number two of a gang that manages all the night shops!”

Isn't that pretty much the same? In fact, that way it sounds like I'm

showing off!

I felt like I didn't have the energy to explain, but I didn't want the first years to keep spreading that big lie, so I summoned up my patience and spoke:

“You know, Hirasaka-gumi is not a gangster organization. It's more like a delinquent-vigilante group. They're all in their twenties, and I'm not a member, I just help them out from time to time.”

“But, they *do* manage clubs and things like that, don't they?”, Chinatsu-chan asked.

“Aah... I think so?”

I help Yondaime out with his business really often, but I don't know much about them. He's a VIP at lots of clubs, so it wouldn't surprise me if he actually managed two or three of them.

“So you *are* well informed about paid dating, right? Right?”

Please stop asking like that. Do I look like someone who would know about paid dating?

“No, I'm not informed at all. What about it?” These two couldn't possibly involved in something like that, right?

“We heard a rumor.” Kenzaki-san sat on the long desk and lowered her gaze, muttering. “Someone from this school meets up with... An adult man, at karaokes and places like that...”

I breathed out from my nose and scratched my head.

“That's, uhm... Uh, why is the Student Council worried about that?”

“Doesn't it worry *you*, senpai!?” Kenzaki-san slapped the desk. “It's illegal!”

“Uhh, w-well”

Come to think of it, I have been involved in several illegal matters, so I'm really not in a position to go proudly preaching about morals.

“Uhm, besides...” Chinatsu-chan couldn't help opening her mouth to interpose. “If she's found out, she'll be suspended from her club activities, the teachers won't shut up about it, and it will be really troublesome. Right now, the female basketball, tennis and softball clubs are doing really well, so...”

Even so, is that something the Student Council should be concerned about?

“And what do you want me to do?”

I noticed after I spoke that my way of talking had been extremely cold.

“W-well, I was wondering if you could use your connections to check up on the karaokes and clubs and all that... We still don't know if someone's doing paid dating or not.... And if you found someone doing it, you could indirectly warn her...”

Do you even know how many karaokes and clubs this city has? I was about to tell her that, but actually, if I asked Yondaime, maybe he could do something.

“Please.” “Please!”

They both bowed their heads at the same time.

“...Did anything else happen?”

It's just, no matter how you looked at it, something was weird. It didn't seem like these high school girls were poking their noses into something like this just because of their sense of duty as members of the Student Council.

Chinatsu-chan and Kenzaki-san exchanged glances and hesitated, staying silent for a moment. The first one who decided to finally open her mouth was Kenzaki-san.

“Haven't you heard, senpai? About... That.”

She hesitated midway through her words, so it was difficult to understand what she was saying, but I had a hunch that I knew

what she meant.

--She was talking about those assaults.

They both explained alternately. Since the winter break, there had been several rape attempts, the targets being high school girls from the neighborhood. Two of those incidents had ended in an uproar, so quite a lot of rumors were spread. All of the perpetrators had escaped and none of them were arrested.

“But, it's more than just a rumor.” Chinatsu-chan said, knitting her brows.

The victims were all previously flirted at and had accepted money: In other words, compensated dating. If the girls reported the crimes they would be found out by their parents and their schools, so they could only resign themselves, and the police didn't move.

“Do you know the victims?”

When I asked that, both of them shook their heads.

“But, there's actually someone who was present at the crime scene.”

Just when Chinatsu-chan said that, I heard the sound of a door opening behind me.

“Sorry I'm late. Still working?”

I turned around upon hearing the voice of a girl, and my eyes met a figure in an awfully short uniform skirt. Her hair was completely bleached into light brown, and she was wearing flashy lip gloss. She covered her mouth with a hand when she saw me; her fingers were adorned with nail art. She looked liked one of those stylish girls you usually see loitering around the city center.

“Ah, Hana-chan, sorry for calling you all the way here! This is Fujishima-senpai whom I told you about earlier.”, Chinatsu-chan said. It seemed like this other girl had been called on the phone before I came to the Inspection room. When she saw me again, she put a plainly frightened expression.

“Eh- F-fujishima? ...Uhm, -that- Fujishima from Hirasaka-gumi?”

The fact that a high school girl I was meeting for the first time had that impression about me me made me feel depressed.

“Senpai, you're famous!”

Chinatsu-chan looked happy for some reason. Kenzaki-san cleared her throat in displeasure again, making Chinatsu-chan shut up instantly. The light brown-haired stepped back to run off the Inspection room.

“W-wait, Hana-chan!”

Chinatsu-chan hastily rushed through my side and grabbed the wrist of the girl who was trying to run away.

“It's okay, senpai is a tight-lipped person!”

“But...”

“Come on, just enter!”

Chinatsu-chan pulled her back into the Inspection room and closed the door, introducing us. Her name was Hishida Hanae, and she was Chinatsu-chan and Kenzaki-san's classmate who had been helping out with the Inspection committee lately.

“Since Fujishima-senpai doesn't do anything, there's lot of work piled up.” Kenzaki-san said, glaring at me.

“....Eh? Fujishima-senpai was on the Inspection committee?”

Hishida-san widened her eyes.

“Yes, but since senpai can't do Inspection work at all, I've been asking you to do the tasks he should be doing... Sorry about that!”

Upon hearing Chinatsu-chan's words, Hishida-san looked at her and me in turn a few times.

“More importantly, Hana-chan, uhm, you see! About... That

incident. I was wondering if you could talk to senpai about that...”

With a look of uneasiness on her face, Hishida-san intermittently glanced at me.

“Talk? Is that okay...?”

“It's fine, you can trust Fujishima-senpai!” Chinatsu-san, what do you know about me? “Senpai is so awesome that not even the police could catch him!”

Chinatsu-chan, that's... Kinda wrong. Yeah, well, I still don't have a criminal record even though I occasionally do some stuff that could land me in jail, but it's still wrong! Look, Hishida-san is looking discouraged already.

“Mmh.” Hishida-san pursed her lips. “But I was actually just being a rubberneck back then...”

“With just the time and the place, Fujishima-senpai will definitely settle this, so don't worry! That's why he's called the *No Hint Detective*.” You got only the first N and the last T right!

“U-uuhm, senpai, so you look for criminals and all that?”

“No, well, I don't think I could go so far, but I might be able to investigate things like who was the victim, or if she was a student from this school...”

In the end, I got carried away because Chinatsu-chan and Kenzaki-san insisted.

“Uhm, when you investigate, please don't tell anyone I was the one who spoke...”

I nodded at Hishida-san's words. He could trust me on that one. Hishida-san's eyes wandered, then she took a deep breath and began speaking while twisting up her light brown hair.

“The third day of the New Year, when I went to the karaoke with a friend--”

*

After school, I went directly to Hirasaka-gumi's office. All of the men in black shirts were absent, which was unusual, and just Yondaime could be seen inside in his desk.

“High school girls that were attacked?”

When he heard what I said, Yondaime knitted his brows.

“You mean the one attacked at the karaoke during the third day of the year, or the one that was attacked last week at the hotel behind E-Space?”

I widened my eyes. Not only he already knew about the incident I was told about, he also knew about another case. Right, Chinatsu-chan did say two of the cases had ended up in an uproar.

“Aah, uhm, the karaoke one. A kouhai from my school happened to see the disturbance.”

I didn't inquire about Hishida-san's story as there wasn't anything conclusive. She was singing with her friends and heard the sound of a glass breaking, and then the loud noise of something collapsing. When she went out to the corridor, the door at the end was broken, and inside the room there was a girl with her clothes roughly torn apart who had broken down crying. An employee rushed in immediately, but the criminal had ran away already. The employee was then going to call the police, but the victim persistently said “It's nothing, don't call them”.

“I'm listening. So what?”

“These girls asked me if I could find out if the girl was a student from my school, and...”

Yondaime snorted.

“So no one knows who the girl they attacked was?”

“She said she caught a glance of her uniform, but couldn't see her face clearly. There's no way she would know the faces of all the students, anyway...”

“Hmph. If you want to prevent those crimes, call the whole school to an assembly and tell them 'wear your uniforms when you're doing compensated dating'.”

“...Why?” I seriously asked that question. As if I could do something like that!

“If they wear their uniforms, at least they can't be taken to hotels against their will. Or they end up like that girl at the karaoke, mere attempts.”

I see. I haven't thought about it that wait. ...Wait, that's not the point!

“Err, then, what about the incident at the hotel behind E-Space? I don't know about that case, though.”

“It was a similar incident.”

That other case happened at midnight last weekend. The receptionist heard a scream, so when he broke into the room, he found a girl who had collapsed with red strangling marks on her neck and wrists. The bed stand and the modular sound system had been knocked over, and the ones who cleaned up the disastrous scene also saw her. Since the girl was a high schooler, the hotel didn't contact the police. It was indeed a similar incident.

“This is just a guess based on rumors, but the girl from the student council told me that the criminals could actually be the same person in both cases...”

Yondaime glared at my face in a bad mood.

“Do you know the common methods in compensated dating? The first one or two times are usually consented, then they force them to drink alcohol and suddenly attack them...”

“Wow, you're way better informed than me...”

As expected from the king of the street youth. Obviously he would know about that kind of stuff.

“That's just what I heard. None of the shops told me to do anything about that so I won't meddle. It's not my problem if dumb girls want to sell themselves cheaply.”

As usual, he drew a cool-headed line.

“If you want to investigate, go ahead and do what you want. I don't have connections with the karaoke, but I know the people from the hotel so you can talk to them.”

“Really? Thank you.”

I didn't know why he was being so kind, so I was perplexed. Then, he added in a low voice:

“Compared to be poking your nose into the Fix matter, it's a lot less troublesome for you to investigate some unrelated pervert.”

I bit my lower lip and fell silent, then I let my words out together with a sigh.

“...This time, I've been wondering if I shouldn't get involved too much on that...”

“That's strange. Thought you'd want to meddle.”

“I'm bad with secrets, so if I help I could end up blurting out something to Ayaka...”

Yondaime snorted.

“I don't care about your boring problems. I'll report my progress to you, too. We don't know what could happen so you have to be aware of the situation.”

I sighed and nodded. Helping Alice to arrange the news was my duty as an assistant, huh.

“Chigasawa Teruhiko is missing. His last trace of activity was a phone call to his parents in November of last year.”

I raised my head and was pierced by Yondaime's drilling gaze.

Chigasawa Teruhiko.

The last survivor of Angel Fix's production group.

“He wasn't involved in the production because he was just an underling of the group, so he's on probation. He dropped out of university, so he was a NEET living only on allowance in an apartment bought by his parents. My men are searching that apartment now.”

And don't even ask how we got Chigasawa's parents to hand us the key, he said in a lower voice.

“I heard about Toshi from Tetsu.”

This time, I couldn't nod nor shake my head.

Toshi-san—Shinozaki Toshio.

Ayaka's older brother who was involved in the selling of Fix. He was the only member of the group who was less than 18 years old at the time of the incident, so he was now put on probation. Since their parents are divorced, Ayaka lives with their mother while Toshi-san lives with their father.

“Anyway, we still know next to nothing. The guys from the mahjong parlors have also disappeared. No matter how many pictures from the security cameras we printed and distributed to look for them, it's a war of attrition.”

“...Has the drug appeared again since then?”

“I still won't talk about that, I only said I'd tell you about the information at hand.”

You said you wanted to chase after that pervert so go focus on that, you idiot, he said and then kicked me out of the office.

When I showed up at the NEET Detective Agency, Tetsu-senpai was already there, sitting on the edge of the bed. Alice glanced at me and typed on the keyboard. It seemed like they were playing an audio file. The file was rewound and a voice was heard.

"Again...?"

"No, I don't know.... They're selling it? Isn't it someone buying stockpiles?"

That hoarse, slightly loud voice made my memories creak like a dusty splintered old door opening. Toshi-san. Toshi-san's voice.

"The other guys.... Chigasawa-san? Isn't he the only one alive...? A-ah, ah, yes, right. ...No, I don't know him at all. I only told him guided him to the greenhouse."

"It's true. I don't know anything!"

"Hakamizaka-san.... He was not right in the head. It was kinda like he... Yeah, like he wanted to create a religion. I didn't know what he was thinking."

Toshi-san's voice gradually turned into whispers to the point I couldn't hear him quite clearly. Alice let out a small sigh and stopped the file.

“This information is practically useless, huh...”

Alice shrugged when she said that, and Tetsu-senpai nodded.

“But, well, I made him promise he would call me immediately if something happens.”

“Since it's Toshi, he's probably shut in alone.”

“I go to see him once in a while. He never lasts long at part-time jobs and all that and mostly stays shut in.”

Tetsu-senpai got up. When we passed each other near the fridge, he

grabbed my shoulders and pushed me aside.

“Leave this Fix thing to me. If possible, you don't do anything.”

Not doing anything if possible.

That choice of words had a weird feeling of kindness, so I couldn't say anything.

“That thing is my prey. To be honest I didn't want Yondaime to take part on this either, but as expected, it's impossible not to rely on Hirasaka-gumi's power.”

The sound of Tetsu-senpai's footsteps walking away behind my back grew distant until they were cut off by the sound of the door opening and closing.

Tetsu-senpai lost one of his friends—Minagawa Kengo, to the Angel Fix.

His hatred for those red angels might be even stronger than Yondaime's. Only once I caught a glimpse of Tetsu-senpai's inner beast. It was the first time I felt real murderous intent directed towards me.

“Yondaime told me on the phone just now. It seems like you're moving onto a different case, huh?”

I came to when I heard Alice's voice and I entered the bedroom.

“Y-yeah... Some kouhais asked me.”

“Is there a remuneration?

“No, it's just a favor. Since I never do anything at the Student Council, I couldn't exactly refuse.”

“Be a little more conscious about your job as a professional detective's assistant.”

Alice turned around. There was no anger in her big round eyes, just

surprise.

“Well, it doesn't matter, as long as you give priority to your tasks here. If you need me to cooperate with that other case, I'll deduct the investigation fee from your salary. With interests and in advance.”

No matter how you look at her, this NEET Detective is a really greedy person. I sighed. Wouldn't it be easier to just tell me that it's absolutely unthinkable for me to neglect my work as an assistant?

Now that I thought about it, being busier meant less time to think about unnecessary stuff. If Ayaka gets suspicious about the NEET Detective Squad being on the move and asks 'Another case?' I could just say 'We're chasing after a pervert'.

When I knelt in front of the bed, Alice opened her mouth again.

“I understand the reason why you changed your mind.”

“....Eh?”

“You have decided not to get too involved in the Angel Fix matter, haven't you?”

“Ah, y-yeah.”

When I came here yesterday, I told Alice that I would be her hands and feet for this case and showed her a great fighting spirit, but today I was saying the exact opposite. And now it seemed like the guilt smoldering inside my chest had been seen through.

“It's for Ayaka's sake, isn't it?”

“I'm glad I have such a sharp employer.”

I tried to make fun of her, but it didn't go well.

“I don't need your boring sarcasm. I'm simply lost.”

“Lost?”

“To know is to die. But a part of Ayaka is already dead already. What should I, a NEET Detective, do? Should I use my words as a sword and kill Ayaka once again?”

I placed my hands on the edge of the bed and stared at the detective's face without understanding.

“....What are you talking about? Killing Ayaka again? It's fine if we just don't let Ayaka know anything, what are you saying?”

Alice brought a raccoon stuffed toy and a blanket close to her chest.

“For now. And I also pray that it continues that way forever.”

“You mean, without having to get Ayaka to remember something about Fix?”

“In other words, it means the possibility exists.”

I climbed up to the bed and edged close to Alice.

“Why? That's impossible, isn't it? And the guys that made the drug that Ayaka had contact with were also Toshi-san's acquaintances, so what Ayaka would know, Toshi would know it too. There's no need for Ayaka to cooperate.”

“That's why I'm praying that it stays that way.”

Alice hid her expressionless face under her black hair and turned her back to me.

I exited the Detective Agency. The short winter day was quickly ending and it was already getting dark. As I was going down the chilly emergency stairs, I thought back upon every single word Alice had said.

A part of Ayaka was already dead.

Killing her again.

Possibility?

The possibility... of making Ayaka remember things related to those red angels? What the hell. I don't understand. I shook my head. My white breath coiled as I sighed, and ran down the last steps of the stairs.

*

From the next day on, I immediately started investigating the assault incidents, because I really didn't want to think about Ayaka and the possibility that Alice had talked about.

Yondaime had told me he knew the people from there, so I skipped the afternoon classes and went to the hotel where one of the incidents had taken place. It was on the outskirts of the city center, in a noisy, crowded corner. I'm not old enough to be allowed in a love hotel, but I've walked this hotel district countless times already, and lately, for some reason I've unfortunately been remembering the names and locations of the hotels.

The love hotel *Juliana* had a tasteless European castle-styled exterior, but if you went around it, you could see it was a sloppy, dirty building with cracked concrete, as if the facade was some kind of splendid papier mache. A great number of vinyl bags were piled up on the side of the back door squeezed inside a linen sack.

They should have brought this case to Yondaime by the time of the incident, I thought. If they had moved faster, maybe the identity of the victim would had been found out in the blink of an eye.

If I go right now, there might still be something left.

On the way, I started doubting. I'm just a high schooler. I really don't want to be seen around love hotels in broad daylight, let alone at said hotels' back doors.

When I mustered up my courage and stepped in front of the steel door, I heard a heavy and loud cracking noise coming from above that caused me to look up and gasp. It came from the window of the

second floor. The window's frame was entirely bent from the wall, and something that looked like sand –rust, probably- was sprinkling down.

“Iyaaaaaa!!”

The voice of a young woman surged through the crack of the window frame. The next second, the sash creaked loudly and came off completely. A half-naked girl fell down together with the glass and the sash. For a moment, I was unable to move my legs or any part of my body.

Fortunately for her, the linen sack was right below. The stiffled collision sound echoed, and I quickly turned my face away. The metal and glass continued creaking, so I rushed in hot haste.

“Are you okay-!?”

The girl in underwear was collapsed face up over the broken glass, and she looked in my direction. Her back had probably collided strongly against the window, and then the sash came off.

When I got closer to her, I noticed she looked really young; she was either a university student, or in the worst-case scenario, a high school student. Blood was flowing from under her shoulders, she had probably been cut by the glass. I lifted her up from the sash by the armpits.

I heard a small 'hih-!' from above and looked up at the hole in the wall, result of the disastrous circumstance, and saw a fat middle-aged man peeking in with a frightened face. He was naked, abnormally goggle-eyed, his lips were purple and he had thick reddish black bags under his lower lids. When his eyes encountered mine, he let out a high-pitched cry again and ducked his face.

What's with that guy? Was he... The one who attacked this girl? Should I chase after him? But what should I do with this girl? It could turn out bad if I call an ambulance.

With those thoughts in my head, I finally called Yondaime.

“Yes, in that hotel's back door... It's seems like a girl has been

attacked.”

In the middle of my conversation on the phone, the back door opened abruptly, and a man in a shirt and a vest appeared; probably an employee from the hotel.

“What happ--”

The employee halted mid-sentence and was startled when he saw the girl in my arms, then he quickly looked up and noticed the hole in the wall.

“Please catch that guy-!” I shouted, pointing upwards, and the employee went back inside.

The girl squirmed, and I covered her body with my duffle coat.

“Uuh..... Nnh...”

She opened her eyes and quickly tried to get up, moaning because of the pain in her back.

“Don't move! You might have broken bones.”

The girl bit her lip and shook her head, supporting herself with her hands to try to get up again. She rose her upper body and looked around restlessly, like she couldn't accept what had just happened. She had black hair and wore light makeup; I assumed she was probably around a year younger than me. Her whole body was trembling because of the cold.

“Ah.... M-my clothes....”

“Let's go inside for now...”

“I have to escape.... gh-, ugh.....”

“No, you can't!”

Was she doing compensated dating? Does she want to run away so badly because it will be bad if she's found out? Anyway, she might be related to the case so I can't let her get away.

“I won't call the police and if your wounds aren't serious I won't call an ambulance either! Calm down!”

My words didn't quite seem to get to her, and she started crawling on the concrete floor, dragging my duffle coat.

At that moment, I heard a voice behind me.

“Aniki!”

When I turned around, I saw two huge men in black T-shirts running to me from the top of the deserted slope. I let out a sigh of relief: *I'm saved.*

Yondaime and the owner of the hotel who was a skinny man with a 'rural yakuza' aura also appeared at the same time. The girl was taken to a tight-lipped doctor Yondaime knows.

The young man I had seen for just a moment on the back door seemed to be the receptionist, and he was between Yondaime and the owner in the office.

“Sorry, the man ran away...”

The receptionist looked depressed as he said that.

“Oshima!! You idiot, that was a high schooler again, wasn't it!? Imbecile! Just reject them at the entrance! Are you blind or what!?”

The owner flew into a rage and scolded the receptionist, then he turned to see Yondaime and bowed his head to him.

“Sou-san, I beg you not to say anything about this. They'd cancel my business permit...”

“More importantly, do you remember the face of the man?”

“Eh, ah, no, not much....”

The receptionist curled up.

“I saw his face. I'll draw a portrait.”, I interjected.

Yondaime glared at me, and then he told “get us some pen and paper” to the young receptionist called Oshima. I took the pen and paper and calmly started to reconstruct the face of that middle-aged man from my memories in my mind.

“We should have footage from the security cameras from the time he walked through the front right?”

“Ah, right, I'll rewind it now.” Oshima ducked his head.

“Do you have any footage of the other uproar left?” Yondaime inquired.

“Y-yeah, there should be a week worth of footage, probably.”

“Let's compare it with that, then. It could be the same man.”

Could it really be the same man? I mean, after causing an uproar with a paid date and running away from this hotel, would he come back and do the same thing again?

“T-that, I-I'll look for that too, right now.”

I'll make it up to you, he said with his face pale, bowing his head countless times.

When I grabbed the pen nib and stared at the white paper while hearing them converse, I suddenly got a feeling of uneasiness. The face of the man who was peeking out from the hole in the wall caused by the torn of window frame. There was something about his face. Trying to find that clue, I remembered his face. I started sliding the pen nib over the paper. A gourd-shaped face, double chin, slightly pushed out thick lips and sunken eyes, and his lower lids---

His lower lids.

My hand froze on the spot. I closed my eyes and recalled that instant once again. The man had pronounced bags under his eyes. Dry blood-colored, reddish-black bags.

The bitter taste inside my mouth was revived. My brain had flashbacks of that feeling of intoxication, that feeling of being peeled off the reality, and that tremendous brightness.

It can't be.

Are you related this time, *again*?

“...What's wrong, Gardening Club kid?” Yondaime said.

The chair rattled as I stood up.

“Was the man like this?” I showed the portrait to Oshima.

“A-ah, aah, yes, that looks like him.”

Hearing his answer, I quickly slapped the paper against the desk and drew over the lower lids with so much strength that I almost broke the pen nib.

“He had blood congestions on his lower lids.”

Yondaime lowered his brows in a grim expression.

That reddish-black blood congestion on the lower lids is the evidence left on the people who can't understand the angels' whispers--

Angel Fix's rejection.

*

The night of the same day, the whole team was reunited at the NEET Detective Agency for the first time in a while. Tetsu-senpai was at the right side of Alice's bed, Hiro-san at the left, Major was sitting at its feet, and Yondaime was standing by the bedroom's entrance with his arms crossed. There was no more room, so I was sitting on the bed by Alice's side.

“Once again, this is a request from Yondaime. We have to catch the paid dating molester.” Alice said, looking at all of us.

“Since the group of mahjong bears couldn't be caught, the investigation resources are no longer unrelated. Tetsu, Major, Hiro, you three focus on the molester. If he's related to the Fix, that might lead us to the mahjong group.”

“Is it confirmed that the same pervert rapist bastard committed all the crimes?” Crossing his arms too, Tetsu-senpai asked in a low voice.

“Not confirmed yet.” Yondaime answered. “Two of the incidents were at that hotel Juliana, so the guy from the hotel said he was gonna look for the footage of the case from before. Hiro, you look for the victims of the other times and confirm it.”

“Okay. Narumi-kun, you said you knew a girl who heard rumors about one of the incidents, right? From the Student Council, was it? Tell me her name.”

“Ah, y-yes.”

Chinatsu-chan's classmate who helped out at the Inspection committee, I think her name was Hishida Hanae-san.

“But I can talk to her when I go to school...”

“No, leave it to me. This is my field of expertise.”

That shine in his eyes is incredibly suspicious. This guy is definitely taking advantage of the circumstances. I should warn her not to get close to Hiro-san.

“There's also the girl who was attacked today...”

“I'll go see her. I want to find out about her identity.” Major said.

“I'll go to the police again. If they know his face, they can try tailing this guy too.” Tetsu-senpai's gaze fell into the copy of the portrait I had drawn. “I wonder if this old man decided to take the Fix and attacked the girl by himself, or there's someone behind this...”

“There might be a crazy person playing god and distributing it again...” Hiro-san said. “They could be intending to get people to take the drug and assault people, or something like that... Didn't that Hakamizaka have that kind of motives?”

“We can't know what that man was thinking anymore. We can only speculate.” Alice bluntly interrupted Hiro-san's words. “Yondaime, go to the hotels, karaokes and clubs and thoroughly find out if there have been similar incidents. The victims could have arranged their compensated dates through their cellphones or the net, so I'll look into that, it should be easy.”

Long hair slipped off the light blue pajama-clad shoulders. The detective stood up. When she turned around, her hair spread up like a jellyfish, gently brushing my cheek as I was still squatting by her side.

“I won't tell you to cast your hatred aside. I can't do something like that. But threaten the second law of thermodynamics, and efficiently change that hatred into your ability to take action.”

The four people surrounding me nodded at the same time.

“Oh, and leave from the front.”

Upon hearing the words Alice added, everyone's gazes turned to the monitors of the security cameras for a moment.

“Yeah” “Understood” “Alright”

The four backs full of confidence were sucked into the darkness of the door frame of the entranceway.

No one asked the reason they should leave from the front door that was never used. Everyone knew already. I also saw the silhouette of the person reflected in the security cameras: Ayaka was carrying empty beer bottles and trash bags from the kitchen door.

If they used the emergency stairs that gave onto the kitchen door and passed in front of Hanamaru, Ayaka would see the furious-looking detective squad and would surely sense the tension. She's always been sharper than me. If possible, I didn't want her to see

anything concerning this case. The others wished the same.

...At least in that occasion.

Yondaime pierced me with his gaze before leaving, and I was left behind in the cold darkness by Alice's side.

Wouldn't it be better if I wasn't here?, I suddenly thought.

If I returned to my normal existence for a while, going from home to school and from school to home, I'd end up not keeping up to date with the progress of the investigation, and I could smile naturally to Ayaka every morning when I saw her in the classroom. I wouldn't need to nervously chose my words as if I was picking them up with tweezers from a printed paper. And there was nothing I could do, anyway.

“What's the matter? Are you that displeased by the fact that I didn't assign a task to you?” Alice said, still by my side. “Didn't you say you wanted to stay as less involved as possible with anything related to the Fix? You have contributed to the investigation with your portrait anyway, so you can be proud of yourself.”

“Uh.... Mh, you see...”

When I told her I was thinking about not coming to the Detective Agency for a while, Alice's black hair suddenly sprang up, hitting my cheek. It was because she had abruptly turned around. Various facial expressions danced on her face, and a sullen one remained in the end.

“D-do as you please!”

Alice turned to the keyboard.

“If you want to return to your useless, meaningless, lethargic, Mughal Dynasty existence, then by all means, do it!” “What was that about Mughal?” “That was just an alliteration!”[1]

The keys being hit started to sound as if she wanted to punch a hole in concrete.

“For each day that you don't show up here, I'll deduct it from your salary, your debt will swell up as gloriously as the Napier Number.”

What the hell. If you want me to come everyday you could just say it.

“N-nobody said such thing! I'm just talking about money!”

Uwah. It's been a while since the last time I accidentally leaked out my thoughts out loud. “Aah, okay... Sorry.”

“Whatever. If I use a stool I'll be able to do the laundry without falling into the washing machine, if I use the handle of a spoon I can easily pull the tabs of the Dr Pepper cans, and if I use Major's specially designed hydraulic chopstick splitter I will be able to split the chopsticks myself!”

“No, well, if you grab the end of the splittable chopsticks and open them slowly, you'll easily split them.”

“Wha--, y-you should have said that sooner! Do you know how much money I invested in the development of that equipment—No! That's not the point!”

“Sorry. I was really being an idiot. I'll surely come over to help you from tomorrow on, Alice.”

“When did I say I was lonely!?”

“I didn't say that either. *You* just said it, actually.”

“A-a-ah....” Alice turned dark red and trembled, embracing Lililoo and hiding her face behind it. “F-forget about that immediately!”

Why? Doesn't everyone already know you're lonely?, I thought, but if I carried on with this subject, it would turn complicated, so I cleared my throat and spoke again:

“Anyway, I reconsidered. I said it was for Ayaka's sake and all that, but I can't skip my duties as an assistant.”

Because I have to become a windbreak for Ayaka's sake. If I just cover my own eyes and shrink down, what good will that do? I

have to stand up and see what the wind brings with my own eyes.

“Hmph. Are you saying you just want to wiggle up and down? If you want to become a street performer, then do it in front of the station. Go knock some empty cans, I don't care in the least.”

“I said I'm sorry...”

But when I turned around and walked to the entrance, I heard Alice's voice behind my back.

“Stay until 19:00 when you come. If you don't, Ayaka will ignore my orders and bring me whatever food she wants, so she will force me to eat a lot of noodles and meat.”

“Okay.”

She suppressed the happiness in her voice, trying not to sound cheerful, but she still did.

*

The next day after school, I went to the Inspection room in order to talk to Chinatsu-chan once again. The Inspection room and the Student Council room are on the third floor where are the first year classrooms are, and a relaxed atmosphere could be felt on the corridors after the bell rang. Watching my innocent juniors happily chatting and coming and going at a quick pace, I once again thought *I really can't afford to repeat the year*.

I was surprised by the face I saw at the entrance of the Inspection room. The one who was coming out was Hishida-san, the witness of the karaoke incident. Well, it wasn't really unexpected. She *did* say she helped out at the Inspection committee.

“Ah, Fujishima-senpai...”

Hishida-san was more surprised than me. She closed the door

behind her in confusion. Why are you so scared?

“Is Chinatsu-chan here?”

“No, she's not... Didn't she go back to the classroom?”

Should I wait then? No, I can just talk to Hishida-san.

“Uhm, you only told Chinatsu-chan, Kenzaki-san and me about the incident you witnessed, right?

Hishida-san nodded with dubious eyes.

“That's good. Please don't talk about it to anyone else. Specially at school.”

I said that because I didn't want anything to appear in front of Ayaka's eyes, but Hishida-san suddenly drew closer to me.

“I-isn't that obvious!?”

The raising of her voice made me step back, surprised.

“Of course I won't say anything, I wasn't even sure I should tell you, senpai!”

“S-sorry”

I extended my hands to calm her down. Hishida-san bit her lip and lowered her gaze. I felt her anger vaporizing from her shoulders.

“...I'm sorry.”

Muttering that, she went running through the corridor. I thought about chasing after her, but then again, I just wanted to warn her.

I blew it. I should have let Hiro-san deal with it using his skills. I really don't know what to say to people I don't know, but Hiro-san had always been a lot better than me at it.

But what the hell was that? Was what I said really something to get so mad about? I really don't understand the first year girls' involvement in this matter at all, like Chinatsu-chan and Kenzaki-

san---

“---Fujishima-senpai-?”

When I turned around at the lively voice, Chinatsu-chan was skipping towards me, with her bunny barrette in her hair.

“You came to report your progress!? I'm thrilled!”

“Aah, yeah...”

Right, I don't fully understand the reason behind Chinatsu-chan and the other girls' request. The other day, I got carried away with the serious topic about the serial paid dating incidents, so I can't really ask any further anymore. Well, it could be a simple school-loving spirit.

Chinatsu-chan entered the Inspection room with me.

“I didn't make any important progress, but before that-” I closed the door behind me. “I don't think you have told anyone, but don't tell anyone else about this case. I don't want rumors to keep spreading anymore...”

When I showed up at Hirasaka-gumi's office, I was greeted by two of the black-shirted men with an “Aniki, thanks for your hard work!” and a respectful bow. Lately, the lackeys are always out and the office is really quiet.

“Just now, a guy called Oshima brought a DVD, saying that you or Sou-san would understand or something like that.”

Oshima? DVD?

“He said something about a hotel and paid dating, so it must be a video from that, uhehe”

“Ah....”

I remembered. The receptionist from the Juliana hotel where the

assaults happened. He probably brought the footage from the security cameras.

“That Oshima was a youngster, his eyes were all red and he had green bags under his eyes, so he probably spent the whole night making this video--”

“No, he probably spent the night looking for the corresponding section... Where's that DVD?”

“Ah, everyone's watching it inside.”

The men in black shirts were swarming like cockroaches around the PC desk of the storage room/bedroom.

“It's been showing the front for some time now, what is this shit!?” “Get to the stripping scene already!”

“Shouldn't we just hit the H key?” “Alright, leave it to me!” “Click on the woman's tits!”

“What are you doing...”

“Ah! Aniki, perfect timing! Please use your god hand to make the high school girl from the video strip!” “It doesn't ever get to the sexy scene!” “Aniki, we beg you!”

I first thought about using my expulsion method on the black shirt men: Drawing a woman in a sexy pose on a piece of paper, show it to them and throw it out the window. But I wasn't in the mood to do that, so I took out my cellphone.

“Ooh! Aniki took out his cellphone!”

“Awesome! He's writing a mail with just his thumbs!” Using other fingers would be difficult, you know.

“He's writing a mail to Sou-san that reads 'Please come right now'!” “As expected from Aniki!” “The only people in this world who could send such a mail to Sou-san are Nee-san and Aniki!” “Sou-san will come running!”

Nine minutes later, Yondaime really did come, and the men in black shirts were knocked out one by one without exception.

“Stop slacking off, you good-for-nothings! Didn't you have to ask around the hotels?!”

As I saw the guys scurrying away, I started to worry that their stupidity was growing bigger every day.

“Have you watched the footage already?” Yondaime said, glaring at me.

“Ah, n-no, not yet, I was about to.”

When I played it on the PC, I noticed it was a really short video.

“What? Did that receptionist take the trouble of editing it?” Yondaime let out a shocked voice.

The image projected in the monitor was of a rough black and white. The front counter of this love hotel looked like a ticket seller from a zoo, and it was filmed obliquely from above. The date and the hour displayed at the lower right were from a Saturday a week before, at midnight. Perhaps this is the time when the incident happened. The person paying at the front and taking a key was the plump middle-aged man I had drawn. He had a gray down jacket and old-fashioned corduroy pants. Standing at a little distance was a flashy young woman with sun burnt shoulders; a different girl from the one I had seen yesterday, of course. The video stopped when the couple that looked like a parent and a daughter because of the age difference disappeared at the right side. After some static, the image started again. The date and hour were yesterday's early afternoon. The middle-aged man paying at the front was wearing a worn out trench coat and a suit. With the exception of the black-haired girl that was now in the video, it was the same as the first half; obviously, since the camera had a fixed position. That black-haired girl was without a doubt the girl who had fallen from the window.

Yondaime who was standing beside the PC desk stretched his hand and stopped the video.

“Same guy?”

“Looks like it. But, why would he go to the same hotel twice...?”

“Maybe he's just stupid, I don't know.” Yondaime said. Then he told me about the girl from yesterday. After she was attacked, she was examined by the underground doctor Yondaime is acquainted with. Her only injuries were bruises and lacerations, nothing serious, so she could go home.

The doctor then explained the situation to Yondaime. The girl's name was Toritani Shinobu, a 17-year-old who attends an all-girls private school in the metropolitan area. Her connection with the man who was with her couldn't be known at all, and what was worse, the cellphone he had left at the hotel room had disappeared.

“Did the offender dispose of it?”

“Do you think he could be so calm to do that in that situation? And he's someone stupid enough to use the same hotel after causing an uproar a week before, too.”

I nodded at Yondaime's words. He was possibly high on Angel Fix, and even if he wasn't, he had been seen by me, so he was in a situation when he could only think about running away quickly. The thought of disposing of the girl's cellphone should have slipped off his mind.

“Anyway, that man won't sneak out that easily. Alice is now tracking the log of the dating web site Toritani Shinobu used, so it's just a matter of time.”

At that moment, the throaty voices of the lackeys were heard from the other side of the office.

“Ojiki, thanks for your hard work!” “Thanks for your hard work!”

The one who opened the room's door was Hiro-san, clad in a cashmere coat.

“Wow, it's been a while since I came here... Oh, Narumi-kun is here too.”

So as to not make Ayaka feel nervous, this time the investigation headquarters wouldn't be the NEET Detective Agency but Hirasaka-gumi's office. Hiro-san sat on the bed and took off his scarf, showing Yondaime and me a cellphone memo. A profile with the address of someone called Fukamachi Hitomi was displayed on the screen.

“I finally found one of the attacked girls. I've been really busy with madams lately and I haven't been playing with high school girls, so it was hard to warm up the line here and there.”

I couldn't help but to feel admiration. From yesterday to today? That's quite a discovery.

According to Hiro-san, Fukamachi Hitomi had accepted a *just holding hands for 20,000* deal with a man in a club's toilet, but then he suddenly strangled her neck and tried to undress her. Other people saw them, so the man escaped. Seems like it's the case from the end of the year.

“So, I showed the portrait to Hitomi-chan, and bingo.”

Yondaime and I looked at each other.

“Then it's settled.”

“According to the rumors, not many girls have been attacked yet, with the exception of Hitomi-chan.”

“It has been happening in succession. And we already know the face of the victim of the hotel.”

“I know, I know. Then we have our infiltration tactics and net approach, so we'll find them.”, Hiro-san said, looking at the paused video on the PC. “We kinda know that old man's job, and Narumi-kun saw his face and drew him so he can't run away.”

Hiro-san saved a picture of the girl from the footage of the earlier week's incident and left the office at a quick pace.

I pulled out the DVD from the PC and put it in my bag, straightened the sleeves of my duffle coat, and sat down again.

This is full of tricks. Moreover, because of a countless number of little thorns, I can't be certain.

“What's wrong?”

Yondaime looked over his shoulder at the storage room's door.

“Go and take the DVD to Alice. Reporting to Alice is your job, isn't it?”

“I... have a feeling that something's weird.”

Yondaime narrowed his eyes and glared at me steadily, and immediately leaned his back against the wall, folding his arms.

“Anything in concrete? Tell me.”

“No, I can't say it clearly, but there's something weird about what this man's doing. There's the thing about using the same hotel twice, but first of all, even though he caused several uproars, was discovered and had to run away every time, why would he do it again? And how did he successfully run away each time? And being high, too. All these little things are making me uneasy.”

There was something else that didn't fit, but I was unable to put it into words. Yondaime snorted sullenly and said:

“Go to Alice's place.”

“...Eh? Ah, o-okay.”

“You might not notice, but since I've been hanging out with Alice for more than three years already, I know. This last year, the speed with with she solves the cases has increased dramatically.”

“Huh?” What is he talking about?

“And that's because she made friends with an idiot who jumps into the river holding a rope in his mouth before the bridge is hanged.”

I blinked, and then I finally understood what Yondaime was saying.

“If some silly thing comes to your mind, don't tell me. Tell your owner. That's your way of doing things.”

Yondaime opened the door to the main room with his foot and nodded over at me. I ducked my head and pushed the PC's power button, exiting the store room.

When Yondaime opened the office's iron door, his cellphone rang.

“...What? ...You found it? ...No, don't bring it here, take it to Alice's place directly, I'll be there in a minute.”

After hanging up his phone, Yondaime looked at me.

“They found Toritani Shinobu's cellphone.”

I opened my eyes. Toritani Shinobu—Yesterday's victim.

“It had fallen under the hotel's bed, it seems the receptionist found it first. It looks like they didn't dispose of it after all.”

With this, if Alice analyzes the phone's history, the identity of that middle-aged man will be discovered easily.

Yondaime and I exited the building and got into a car. When I leaned my back against the cold passenger's seat, my impression that something wasn't quite right felt stronger than ever.

“Ah, Fujishima-kun!”

When I passed in front of the ramen shop's kitchen door to go up the emergency stairs, Ayaka came out from there. She wasn't wearing her black apron yet, so she had probably got there just now.

“It seems like you're doing your work properly at the Inspection committee, Chinatsu-chan looks really happy.”

“Eh? Ah, y-yeah.”

“You're practicing to not become a NEET, right? Do your best,

Fujishima-kun!”

Sorry, Ayaka. The job Chinatsu-chan asked me to do is a yakuza-like business that will make me a NEET at full speed. I joined my palms together in my heart.

“Well, I also have something to ask you...”

“W-what?”

“I was wondering if you could make armbands again...”

Ayaka was the leader of a Student Council organ going by the weird name of Central Gardening Meeting—Which was in fact just the Gardening Committee—so she wore a black armband with an orange logo.

“Huh? There were forty of them at the start... Are they no longer there?”

“You see, they... Somewhat disappeared.” Ayaka said, making an apologetic frown. “They were together with the copying equipment and the activity diary, but god knows where the case is now. I was sure I had left it in the Inspection room's shelves, but... I wonder if it's in the Student Council room...”

“I can do those armbands anytime, so it's okay. And I'll look for the case in the Inspection and the Student Council rooms when I have free time.”

“Thanks, Fujishima-kun!”

Ayaka immediately cheered up and went back through the kitchen door. I softly stroked down my chest. I had gotten here on Yondaime's car, and Yondaime had entered the Detective Agency through the building's front so that Ayaka wouldn't notice him. Ayaka didn't suspect anything about this case.

I went up the emergency stairs while thinking *It would be nice if this case gets solved quickly*. I hope everything goes as expected, without Ayaka knowing anything. But with every step I was taking, that feeling of uneasiness was sticking to my shoe soles, like an ivy

sprouting and spreading, twining around my feet. What is this? There was some kind of connection, but I couldn't find the clue.

Yondaime was sitting in the kitchen of the Detective Agency, talking to someone on the phone.

“Right. Mi-ya-gi-shi No-bu-o, Miyagishi Nobuo. I mailed you his address, it's in Oota. Send four people go there and the company he works at too, it's possible he arrives carefreely. Alice is now tracking Miyagishi's cellphone's GPS. It's just a matter of time.”

Is he giving instructions to his subordinates? Yondaime nodded at me and I passed through, entering the bedroom. Alice was on the bed with her gaze fixed on the monitors.

“As you can see, we've found that man's identity.”

Alice said with her back turned at me. I gulped. They just brought the girl's cellphone here and she already finished cracking it and analyzing it? A phone is a cluster of private information, and a seriously dreadful amount of information can be obtained through it.

“Miyagishi Nobuo works as a designer at a design office called Meguro.”

Above Alice, the best monitor in the room displayed Miyagishi Nobuo's private information. There was also a picture of his face. The second monitor at the left displayed showed a still from the love hotel's front security camera's footage. It was the same man on both pictures. It was the same face.

“He earns a great income and is single, so he's completely absorbed into compensated dating.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. So, once she finishes cracking his GPS, Hirasaka-gumi's men will probably break into his house and his company and Miyagishi will be found and done for.

The conditioned air revealed the outlines of the bad feeling sticking to my arms. It's definitely weird. Alice turned around:

“You think it's strange, too?”

“Eh?”

“Me too. I'm unable to stomach this conclusion. We're progressing at an incredibly good timing.”

Alice's words forcibly thrust the cold into my skin. Yes, everything is going too smoothly. Something's weird. We're overlooking something.

That *something* was on the upper left of my field of vision.

I held my breath and raised my gaze. The bedsheets got stranded in my knees as I stared at the monitor: The security camera's video from the front.

“Alice, rewind this.”

“Hm? I'm in the middle of an operation, do it yourself.”

She left the mouse to me. I moved the video's seek bar from left to right countless times to be certain.

There's no doubt.

“Alice, there.”

I pointed, and Alice turned her body and followed my gaze.

“There's a potted plant in the entry hall on the video.”

“What about it?”

“This potted plant's shadow is almost directly on the right, on the video from yesterday and on last week's too.”

“Well, obviously, it's a fixed camera--”

Alice gulped down halfway through her words. Her gaze met mine for just an instant, and then she jumped at her keyboard. A heavy rain of key hitting started. She scrolled through a great number of characters on the monitors.

Just when Yondaime finished his long phone conversation and entered the bedroom, Alice's hands had already stopped. Alice and I were staring at the expanded reality in the monitor.

“Miyagishi Nobuo has been absent without permission since yesterday. A guy from the company said that they can't communicate with him either. His house is also completely empty. He ran away... Were you able to get into his cellphone's GPS?”

Alice answered Yondaime's question with her back at him.

“I was. Miyagishi's cellphone is at his house, so we can't use it to pursuit him.”

Yondaime slightly tilted his head and clicked his tonge.

“He left his cellphone behind and ran away? We're at the starting point again? Where could he ran off to?”

Just like Alice, Yondaime probably noticed upon following my gaze, and he was quiet for a brief moment.

“...What's that list?”

Displayed in that monitor there was a list of eight girls, their names, phone numbers and schools they attended.

“A list of the paid dating women?” Yondaime said. I nodded slightly. We already knew three of the names on that list:

Toritani Shinobu: The girl who feel down the window.

Fukamachi Hitomi: The one Hiro-san found, the club victim.

And the third one... *Hishida Hanae*.

Alice began hitting the keyboard with both hands again.

“We can find Miyagishi. From now on I'll deal with everything related to machines and focus on cracking GPS; Yondaime, prepare the car and urgently meet everyone at Hotel Juliana! I wonder if we'll be in time...”

“Oi, what do you mean? Did Miyagishi do something?”

“I'll explain later, hurry up!”

Yondaime clicked his tongue at Alice words and quickly turned to the Agency's entrance. I dialed Hiro-san's number on my cellphone and went behind Yondaime.

The car we were chasing after was going towards South Sakurada Avenue, near Meiji Gakuin University. I was on the passenger seat of Yondaime's Maserati, and Hiro-san's dark gray BMW was a bit ahead.

“I saw it, the number is.... From Shinagawa...”

The short day was ending, and I was reporting to Alice while looking through binoculars in the twilight-drenched road. I had this hands-free system for a while, but I never thought I would find it so useful. After a short silence only crushed by the sound of the accelerating vehicle, Alice's voice came back.

'That's the car, there's no doubt. Do you see who's on that car?'

Among all the tail lights that were like banks of fish at the bottom of the sea, Hiro-san's BMW swiftly got closer to the targeted car by the left side. Said prey was a red Suzuki Alto Works.

'There's a girl on the passenger's seat.'

'That's probably Toritani Shinobu.' Alice said. From all the paid dating girls, she was the only one whose whereabouts couldn't be confirmed. 'This is bad, she's also in danger. Can you look a bit more into the car's interior?'

'It's a bit dark...'

None of us could see clearly inside the car. I heard Tetsu-senpai's voice, as he was on the same car as Hiro-san.

'A huge man in a suit got into the car.'

I gulped, briefly exchanging glances with Yondaime on the driver's seat. Is it Miyagishi? Yondaime pressed the accelerator, meandering through the width of the road and surpassing car after car. When we saw the Alto Works small rear and the big BMW's back, we heard Hiro-san letting out an 'Ah-'.

“What's wrong?” Yondaime asked.

“They saw me. I've been noticed, kinda.”

It was as Hiro-san said. The Alto Works quickly accelerated, its rear lights becoming smaller. Yondaime clicked his tongue and slowed down. The Alto Works completely ignored the traffic lights changing to red and rushed through the intersection.

“Hiro, I'm going to kill you! If you don't wanna die, get back!”

Yondaime shouted. I knocked the back of my head against the seat's head rest. The cars rushed away side by side from left to right on the intersection, and the bank of headlights advanced on. The noisy car horns beat my consciousness. Hiro-san didn't say anything in reply, but the car that was ahead of our Maserati and crossed over the traffic light was the big BMW's back. Before that, its back lights that were like hidden in the darkness had caught a glimpse of the red Alto Works. Avoiding the cars ahead of us on the left and the right, Yondaime lowered his speed almost completely. I was feeling as if I had been thrown into a washing machine. I didn't really feel dizzy, but it was as if my brains and my gastric juices were mixing and blending together, I couldn't know for sure if I was having nausea or a headache.

Before long, we passed Hiro-san's BMW. What was unbelievable, however, was the Alto Works running away. Although it was a light motor vehicle, it forcibly made its way through the small space between both cars in front of it, making it impossible for us to chase after it. Isn't he scared to cause an accident?

The second time it ignored the traffic light there were cars turning to the right, so it simply thrust its muzzle, forming a perfect letter S and running through. The horns increased, obviously sounds of collisions were heard, and I ducked my head. As expected,

Yondaime put his foot on the brake. He accelerated again throwing his Maserati into the messy row of cars from the left. As if it was sneering at us, the twilight-colored Alto Works' back approached another traffic light. Driving recklessly was now out of the question.

“That bastard, is he stoned?”

Yondaime cursed. I was taken aback—That possibility existed. Angel Fix sharpens every sense to its limits. If that was the case, the fellow passenger was in even greater danger.

The Alto Works's back quickly slipped into the darkness and disappeared, narrowly turning to the left. The GPS pursuit application in the car navigation system's marker blinked.

'Yondaime, stay there, Hiro, go to the bypass, we're going to narrow down his route!'

Alice shouted. Yondaime turned in the direction of a building on the left, and the tires made a shrill noise. I bumped my head against Yondaime's left shoulder. The tail light concealing itself in the darkness was dimly visible. Cutting a swath through the on-street bicycle parking, the Maserati accelerated again.

The Alto Works' movements were strange; even though it was a straight road, it kept scraping against the roadside trees. Is it because of the drug?

I shivered.

What will happen if an angel takes him away while he's driving? Do we... Do we have a way to stop him?

“--Alice!” I squeezed out my voice. “Can you crack that guy's cellphone? Can you tamper with his ringtone?”

“Ringtone? What are you--”

“Bob Dylan's! The one that *calls them*!”

I heard the detective letting out a small gasp. Holding the steering wheel, Yondaime's face contorted. The sound of the keys being hit

was stirring up my consciousness, but it ceased before long.

In the stifling silence, the Alto Works slid into an alley at its right, disappearing from our field of vision for a moment. The instant the Maserati turned to the right street, time stopped inside me. Like diluted ink, the small red car's right tire emerged from the darkness and could be seen dimly, unmoving. It was almost inaudible, but the piercing guitar and organ of *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*'s intro could be heard resounding from the cellphone. It pierced through me, knocking the door of a far-off memory. I couldn't breath.

The Alto Works' body started leaning to the left, by inches. The bass pulsed, the chorus heaped. Soon, Dylan's singing voice reached out to me from that distant, distant night.

I breathed out. At that instant, time melted at once. The fierce fricative sound was piercing my ears, and the small red car swung and spun. Yondaime stepped on the brake. I covered my face with my hands. From the gaps between my fingers, I saw the Alto Works crashing sideways into a concrete wall.

Under the dim fluorescent lamps of the narrow alley, the red light motor vehicle was caught between the BMW and the Maserati, its hood showered with fragments of the concrete wall.

Tetsu-senpai was the first to rush out of the BMW's passenger's seat, thrusting his hand into the Alto Work's torn window and unlocking the door, dragging the fat man out from the back seat.

“Oi, Narumi, what is this? No one explained anything to me!”

Tetsu-senpai cursed, looking down at the suit-clad middle-aged man who had tumbled off the car. He leaned over, unfastening the tower that was gagging his mouth.

Miyagishi Nobuo. That man whose face I saw only once at the hotel, and then two times on the security camera's footage. His hands seemed to be tied behind him, and he was coughing violently, twisting his constrained body.

“Isn't this old man the criminal? Why is he all tied up? Why---”

Tetsu-senpai looked at the Alto Works driver seat. It was the exact part that had crashed into the wall, so it was the part that was crushed the worst.

Hiro-san turned to the passenger seat and opened the door.

“...It's alright now. Are you hurt badly? It's okay, you can get off.”

Saying those kind words to the girl in a uniform, he reached his hand out to her and helped her out of the car. It was indeed the high school girl who had been hurt for falling off the hotel's window, Toritani Shinobu. She was looking downwards, embracing her own chest, trembling like a rabbit drenched in the rain.

Lastly, Yondaime went into the car from the empty passenger's seat, dragging out the body on the driver's seat. His deep blue jacket, his hair, forehead and nape were covered in blood.

That person was Hotel Juliana's receptionist, Oshima.

“Why is this guy here?”

Yondaime said along with a rough sigh, glaring at me as I was getting off the Maserati.

“Because that Oshima is the real criminal.”

My dry voice seemed to vanish, mixing up with the wind blowing on the city's night into the alley. Yondaime, Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san looked at me with bewildered eyes.

“Are you saying this guy is the one who assaulted all those girls?” Hiro-san inquired, quickly glancing at Oshima.

“No. This isn't a case of serial assaults in the first place.”

While I was speaking, I glanced at Toritani Shinobu's face.

“Then what is it?” Tetsu-senpai asked. I let out a warm exhalation and gulped down.

“It's a systematic badger game.”

Toritani Shinobu's shoulders shook, suddenly but subtly.

Hiro-san took Toritani Shinobu and the still blood-drenched Oshima aboard his BMW's back seats. I was also transferred to that car's passenger seat. Miyagishi's large body was corked up on the back of the Maserati, and Tetsu-senpai was sitting beside him. I heard Yondaime talking with Hirasaka-Gumi's lackeys, giving them instructions to deal with the broken car left behind. With that, both cars got going.

Toritani Shinobu had Oshima's head on her lap, showing a pitiful look as she wiped his blood with a handkerchief. They're probably lovers, I thought. It's possibly one-sided on the girl's part, though.

Shortly after the car had started, Hiro-san said with a sigh:

“...It was all a frame-up from the start, then?”

I nodded.

“Oshima probably managed the compensated dating group. That's why all the incidents were similar in prices and conditions. Then, he thought this method would be far more profitable than normal prostitution. He made him assault girls in places he knew, using the camera's footage to blackmail.”

At any rate, if it was made public, it would become a criminal case, making it a much more effective threat than a normal badger game.

To go that far, he must have wanted a large sum of money sooner rather than later, I thought. Why? What on earth stimulated Oshima that badly?

'Hey, wait a second.'

I heard Tetsu-senpai's voice coming from the speakers. The voice system was still connected with the car behind us.

'Why were the men conveniently violent every time? Did he only pick perverts with a hidden sadistic side or something?'

'Are you an idiot?' Yondaime interjected in a shocked tone. 'They were *drugged*.'

'Ah...'

Tetsu-senpai became speechless.

“He made them take Angel Fix!?”

Hiro-san turned his gaze to the reflection in the rear mirror, looking at Oshima on Toritani Shinobu's lap.

“Is he stupid? That's incredibly dangerous. Did he want money that badly? What was he thinking?”

“Oshima-san was--”

For the first time, Toritani Shinobu's voice was heard.

“...Whenever we met with men, he always stayed in the room next door and things like that, and immediately went to stop them, so...”

“The one who turned the cameras and also hid the men when the disturbances occurred was Oshima, right?”

I confirmed it with her. Her black haired suddenly fell to her face. She must have nodded. When the incident at the karaoke happened, the paid dating man using the room at the end ran away successfully, probably because Oshima probably let him into his room next door and hid him. But this risky thing wouldn't go smoothly forever. Before long, Oshima got the joker. I became an eye witness—In yesterday's incident. The way the man attacked the girl, and the fact that the window would break wasn't expected at all. It was just bad luck to Oshima; the eyewitness was me, Yondaime's companion, so in the blink of an eye, the danger of Hirasaka-gumi investigating the matter rose to the surface.

“And then, Oshima thought about making it look like serial paid dating assault incidents, framing Miyagishi Nobuo as the criminal.”

A throaty cry came from the speakers. Was it Miyagishi, who was on the other car?

“The scheme consisted on making it seem like there was no such thing as a paid dating group, but a single perverted man who assaulted the girls he went out with one after another.”

“...So, that security camera footage was made up by Oshima. I've been careless too, huh.”

Yondaime said in a pained voice. It was just as he said. The video from Hotel Juliana where two of the incidents took place that Oshima submitted saying it was footage from last week's incident was fake. First, the paid dating group members called a different girl, threatened Miyagishi Nobuo who was confined, and made him act with the girl in the front.

“It's like that, right, Miyagishi-san?”

When I inquired, a twitchy cry came from the speakers again.

'...Y-yes, but, who are you guys...?'

'Don't say unnecessary stuff' Tetsu-senpai interrupted in a threatening tone. 'So, they framed this perverted old man as the criminal, they were going to take him out and disappear with him, but what did they intend to do after that?'

Who knows, I don't know that either. Perhaps they didn't even think about it.

Oshima might have been just walking a tightrope, but he did it quite well. Hiding Toritani Shinobu's cellphone at once, deleting all the dangerous messages and the received calls history and reporting to Hirasaka-Gumi that he had found it today was a really clever plan. Because of that information control, Yondaime and I half believed that Miyagishi was the only criminal.

'Gardening Club kid, when did you notice?'

Yondaime's questioning voice oozed bitterness.

“No, well, I didn't really notice until the last moment. It was when I looked at the video from the security camera again in Alice's room. The shadow of potted plant in the entry hall was the same on yesterday's and last week's video.”

'The potted plant's shadow? What the hell?'

“Don't you get it? Last week's incident was at midnight. There wasn't light from outside, so the potted plant shouldn't be casting a shadow to the opposite side of the entry hall. That was the evidence that it was a fake video filmed at daytime.”

The sound of a deep exhalation came from the speakers; most likely from Yondaime. His admiration probably wasn't aimed towards me but to Oshima. The desperate measures he took were a big deal. Even if it was just for a moment, he deceived Yondaime, Alice and me.

But that wasn't all.

I heard an 'U-uh' voice from behind. Oshima was trying to lift his head from the girl's lap. He opened his bloodstained eyelids just a little, peeking at the cloudy light.

“…Money, need money-”

Oshima groaned.

“ Money- ……To Shushuri, money……”

What? What did he say just now? I turned my body from the passenger seat, trying to look at Oshima's face, but he had lost his energy and had fallen into the girl's lap again.

I sighed and returned to my seat, pressing my back against it.

Sobbing reached my ears from behind.

“...I told you... We should stop...”

Holding Oshima's head in her arms, Toritani Shinobu muttered while weeping.

“You can't run away anyways, you were even stopped...”

Oshima probably knew more than anyone that he couldn't run away. That's why he had been relying on Angel Fix lately.

A faint connection noise came from the speakers. Soon, the voice of a little girl was heard.

'—Is Oshima conscious?'

“No... Just now he opened his eyes for a moment, but...”

I answered that to Alice, and gazed at Oshima's face on the girl's lap. Under his eyelids, there were distinct reddish-black blood congestions.

He might not be able to turn back—I had that feeling. His wounds might not be serious, but his soul has been probably rejected by the angels already, thrown away into the depths of the earth. Those words have been probably lost for all eternity.

What was he saying just now? I clearly heard something about money. Then I heard some unfamiliar words... --Shushuri? Or something like that.

Once again, Alice's voice resounded from the speakers, interrupting my thoughts.

'Well then, Toritani Shinobu, do *you* hear my voice?'

The girl hugging Oshima's head trembled.

“...What... What? T-this voice, no....”

“She's just talking through the radio, so it's okay.” I said, comforting her. My words were just a reverberation inside an empty shell, serving no purpose.

But Alice's words were different, because they were blades.

'Toritani Shinobu. I only have one question for you. After you answer it, you can either surrender, or spend the rest of your life as

a grave keeper—Do as you please. I'm personally not interested in the slightest.'

Alice's cold words minced the girl's body. She just shook her head. Her muffled crying voice had already ceased. Only the roar of the car running on the night street remained.

'Are the members of the compensated dating group socially linked with each other? Do you know Hishida Hanae from M High School?”

Toritani Shinobu fell silent. Then she raised her knees, bringing Oshima's face closer to hers, letting their foreheads touch. It didn't seem like she had nodded, and Alice couldn't have seen her either, however, the detective carried on with her questioning.

'That being the case, you probably know about a favor Oshima asked Hishida Hanae. Something completely unrelated to compensated dating, something that only Hishida Hanae could do.'

Silence again.

Holding the steering wheel, Hiro-san quickly glanced at the back seat. The car made an abrupt turn to the left, entering the national highway. It was noisy, and the night outside the window was studded with the lights of the cars that were running parallel to us.

'If you keep silent, Oshima's wish will keep buried at the bottom of the trash. His feelings will remain unreachable.'

The detective's sophistry, I thought.

The detective can't guarantee that she can reach the exact place where those feelings are. We don't know what kind of man Oshima is, pr what is he thinking, we know nothing. What was he so impatient about? If he continued managing the paid dating group, and if it gave him a stable income, why would he kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? Something must have driven him to the wall. Just who, and with which words did they let him hear the whispers of the red angels' wings?

I don't know.

In the first place, we don't have a reason to give form to his words.

But--

Before long, she opened her mouth.

“...Oshima-san is...”

*

I like the fifteen minutes after the bell that signals the end of the class rings. When everyone draws their chairs back, sounding like they're hitting a galvanized plate, reverberating like a sudden shower rain; the footsteps and friendly chatting voices gradually filling the corridors; when the bell rings, the atmosphere changes into a relaxed mood—The kind of feeling you get when you're gazing at the ebb tide rising in the shoal.

The thing was, lately I had been feeling nothing but this outside the classroom. I skipped the sixth period again. When I gazed at the corridor, students were coming out one by one from the doors of the first year classrooms aligned on the left side. With my back against the Inspection room's door, as if I was hiding my body within the shadows of the lockers, I waited. The scenery in sight from the third floor's window that was partly the sky and partly the city wasn't calm.

“Fujishima-senpai.... What is it? Geez.”

When I separated my body from the door upon hearing a voice, I saw the Student Council president, Kenzaki-san, rushing over my way, holding her bag.

“Sending something like 'come immediately after class'... How do you know my mail address in the first place--”

“Aah, sorry for looking it up without permission. You see, there's a reason for it.”

I had to get Kenzaki-san to be the only person to come in front of the Inspection room, so I asked Alice to find out her cellphone's mail address.

“You're not going to enter the Inspection room?”

“I sent Hishida-san out to fetch the key just now.”

When Hishida-san's name was mentioned, Kenzaki-san's facial expression clouded slightly. What a sharp perception this girl has. She sensed the reason why I had called her to talk.

I took a deep breath and continued talking.

“I solved the case you asked me to look up.”

“W-wait a minute, please, talking about this in this place is--”

Kenzaki-san looked around nervously.

“It's okay, the talk will be short. The manager has been caught, so the group is done for.”

Kenzaki-san's gaze fell to her feet. The fact that no questions were asked even after I said such ambiguous words were more evidence than anything.

“Kenzaki-san, you knew already, right? Chinatsu-chan knew, too.”

Her gaze turned to my face again. Her facial expression looked as she was holding back any sentiment from taking form.

“Hishida-san wasn't a witness of the karaoke incident. She was the victim.”

There weren't any eyewitnesses, just the victim herself—Because she was also part of the compensated dating group managed by Oshima.

Kenzaki-san tightly caught hold of her left arm with her right hand, turning her face away from me.

“...It's just... Isn't that just wrong? It happened to her, but she talked as if it was someone else's business, saying things like 'I'll consult it with my friends'... We went along with that. I somehow understand that much, because we've been friends with Hanae since a long time.”

I nodded.

Those were the true colors behind the uneasiness I felt towards Kenzaki-san and Chinatsu-chan's motives.

The Student Council members' wanting to do something about the paid dating rape attempts occurring in the city was indeed something unreasonable. But these girls didn't do it to protect the peace at school in their role of staff members. They just wanted to help their friend.

Bowing her head and saying 'Thank you very much, excuse me', Kenzaki-san entered the Student Council room.

Once I made sure the door had been closed, I turned on my heels and pulled the Inspection room's door open.

Sitting on the desk surrounded by steel racks of the Inspection, Hishida-san was sobbing. A little earlier, I had called her here, telling her to wait. I'm glad that my words reached her.

I closed the door behind me, waiting until her weeping was almost indistinguishable from the after-school noise.

I don't know the details about how he got to know Oshima and started doing compensated dating. Alice or Yondaime probably would be capable of squeezing out more information about her connection to Oshima, but right now I don't have the willpower to do so.

Hishida-san wanted to quit doing compensated dating, but she couldn't speak her mind about it to anyone, so to ease her pain, she decided to talk to her two friends pretending it had happened to someone else. That SOS signal properly reached her friends.

For that reason, no detective-like words would come out of my mouth at that moment.

Hey, Hishida-san. You started helping out at the Inspection committee under Oshima's orders from the start, right? He ordered you to *steal something that was stored somewhere within M High*, right?

That question withered inside my throat.

“Are you going to continue helping out at Inspection?”

With her eyes red from crying, Hishida lifted her head, just a little.

“You were helping out to make everyone happy—You told a lie of that kind, right?”

For that reason, I want her to continue helping out at the Inspection committee. I want the lie she told Chinatsu-chan to not be a lie. Besides, I can't do Inspection work at all.

Hishida-san jumped off the desk, passing by my side, and she walked out of the Inspection room at a quick pace. That's still fine for now, though. It's just a matter of time until her tears dry.

After that, I heard the sound of the contiguous Student Council door opening vigorously, and a voice resounding clearly from the other side of the wall.

“Kaya-chan! Is it true!? Is the case closed!? ...Uwah, awesome! As expected from Fujishima-senpai! I have to tell Hana-chan right now!”

It was Chinatsu-chan's voice. Kenzaki-san's rebuking voice was also heard immediately. Yes, if you suddenly go and tell her so joyfully, the effort you put into pretending you didn't notice she was lying will go to waste.

It would be bothersome if Chinatsu-chan saw me now, so I also left the Inspection room. Straightening the sleeves of my duffle coat, I carried my bag on my shoulders and started going down the stairs,

passing by the the cheerful first year students.

“...Sorry, I couldn't confirm it with Hishida Hanae.”

As soon as I showed up at the NEET Detective Agency, I reported to Alice.

“I thought so.” She said with her back turned on me.

“What do you mean by 'I thought so'?”

“Your employer can't properly calculate your bottomless softheartedness. The information obtained through Toritani Shinobu is enough. In addition, the Gardening Committee's armbands were found in Oshima's room, so it's settled.”

I sighed, leaning my back on the bedroom's doorframe.

“How's Oshima's condition?”

“He's still unconscious.”

As I thought, huh. My mood became dark.

“That's why we still don't know who gave it to him. Anyway, inside the case found in Oshima's room, there was the armbands, a pen, vinyl tape and safety pins only. The copy of the activity journal from the Gardening Club times has completely disappeared. There's hardly any doubt...”

Alice turned around, her cold gaze piercing through the pit of my stomach.

“--Their objective is the cultivation notes for the poppy flowers Ayaka grew.”

1. ↑ Japanese for ‘useless’, ‘meaningless’ and ‘lethargic’ are ‘*mu*da’, ‘*mu*ri’ and ‘*mu*kiryoku’.

Chapter 3

Toshi-san, who I hadn't seen in a year, was like the root of a tree that can't rot, twisting and drying up completely in the soil.

“...Aah. Narumi, huh?”

Switching his gaze from the TV to my face, Toshi-san spoke in a hoarse voice.

“Why the hell is everyone like this? Dad's the same. I told you not to enter, what the hell?”

When he clutched his face, some hair between his fingers came out, falling onto the dark floor.

I gulped and looked around inside the room. Magazines, convenience store bags, half-eaten snacks and opened videogame packages were lying around, and I almost couldn't know where the bed or the chair were. Dust was languidly floating in the light that slipped off from the hem of the opaque curtains.

“You're alone?”

“No. Tetsu-senpai is waiting outside.”

Toshi-san made an ominous sound and coughed, then he opened his mouth again.

“Ayaka... Does she still not remember me?”

I nodded, remembering the dull pain in the pit of my stomach.

Toshi-san's surname is Shinozaki, the same as his sister, Ayaka. After their parents' divorce, the siblings had been under the custody of their mother, but since the Angel Fix incident a year ago, Toshi has been living in this apartment in Sedagaya, with his father who had a different surname. Just because of that, one can imagine their

everyday life must be suffocating.

That twisted daily existence was for Ayaka's sake. Because of Toshi-san—well, actually, it can't be stated definitely whose fault it was, since it was a complicated incident, though—She was injured and lost her memories.

Toshi-san was part of the Angel Fix's manufacturing and selling group, so he had been taken by the judicial authorities and then put on probation. His mother was deemed unable to take care of him as she didn't have enough parental authority, so a number of adults discussed the matter and took this desperate measure.

“Ayaka must be having fun, huh. It's such a pain in the ass that I'm here, and it's such a pain in the ass that she can't remember a thing.”

Toshi-san muttered, looking at his own knees. Since he was wearing a jersey and was sitting all curled up on his chair, he resembled the shell of a bug.

“So, why are you here? You're one of them, so you probably want me to talk about something?”

An unpleasant laugh came from his throat. I licked my lips; they tasted like aluminium.

“Yes.”

I replied in a hushed voice. Seeing Toshi-san acting like that, I couldn't relax. He raised his gaze. Those two eyes were staring into nothing.

“I don't care about you, Toshi-san. The only thing I want is information.”

I'm not interested in how many times they fired you from your part-time jobs, or how long did you have to crawl in the mud until you could wash it away. I let my voice out, adding:

“Weren't you in contact with Chigasawa Teruhiko?”

Chigasawa Teruhiko is the other survivor of the group of Fix manufacturers and sellers. Just as Toshi, he was in a low position within the group so his sentence was suspended, but he was now missing.

“I already said I know nothing. I lost count on how many times I told Tetsu-san that.”

“Wasn't there any other people related to the group? Someone who could have stored some Fix somewhere.”

“I told you I don't know anything. I only sold the thing to people that approached me on the city center. That was the use that guy had for me. Anyway, the police must have told the whole story already...”

“But, in the end nobody understood Hakamizaka.”

He was the son of a Gunma's second generation Diet member. He had graduated with honors and they had great expectations on his future. He received a large allowance, lived in an apartment in Nerima and did as he pleased. This superficial information was blabbered about in variety shows and weekly publications, but no one was interested in talking about what he was thinking, or with what purpose did he distribute the Angel Fix in the city.

“Toshi-san, don't you know anything? You talked to him face to face.”

“I don't know. Who cares either way? He's dead.”

“Maybe he's not dead.”

Toshi-san's dull gaze focused completely on my cheeks and my eyes.

“That man might still be alive inside someone else. What I'm saying is, that man's words, his wishes, his desires, maybe they're still living somewhere.”

“...The hell are you saying?”

“It just feels that way, somehow. In this case, the people using Fix

are doing it under the pressure of necessity, to earn money. Moreover, they're all doing it just now. We don't know where the money that person earned through threats is yet."

"Didn't he use use it to buy Fix?"

"If he was just buying it, wouldn't he just need to manage a compensated dating group normally? Why would he use Fix to buy Fix? It doesn't make sense. That way of doing things wouldn't last long."

"Well, I already say I don't know anything at all! If that's all, just go home already!"

I firmly swallowed my words. Indeed, that's all. To hell with you. That time, the wounds carved on my fists were the very cause of Toshi-san being imprisoned in the dirty mud, but I don't regret it, I'm not thinking about apologizing or making up for it. For no one else's sake but for myself, I hit him, hurting him and getting hurt.

Even then, I still continued my words:

"Doesn't Hakamizaka Shirou still live inside you, Toshi-san? Stuck, obstructed, unable to move?"

Toshi-san's gaze crept about my face like a sea louse.

"To know is to die. Shouldn't you die one more time?"

There was no answer for some time. A rebroadcast of a police drama was being transmitted on the TV. A gunshot resounded, but there wasn't a single drop of blood on our side. When I gave up and was standing up, Toshi-san opened his mouth.

"...Yeah, that's right. Hakamizaka-san didn't tell me anything."

Half-kneeling, I drew a few centimeters closer to Toshi-san.

"That's why even now, I'm still thinking. Why didn't he take me with him? Where did he go?"

He died, I answered in my heart. He vomited everything in the

concrete, and writhed in pain in a hospital bed until he died. Then he revived through you, the two survivors. Why won't you notice that?

“Why was it scattered in that city? Was it? Was it there? Oi, what the hell? Why did you leave me behind...?”

My throat stiffened and I stared at Toshi-san.

Why was Angel Fix scattered in our city...? Even now, that question hasn't been solved. Did they want to lead the metropolitan area's business districts? If so, then why didn't they spread it around Shinjuku or Ikebukuro? Hakamizaka Shirou's home was in Nerima, so he wasn't particularly near our streets.

“Toshi-san, was Hakamizaka's father the owner of the building where the drug was refined?” I inquired, sidling up to the chair. For a moment, Toshi-san didn't seem to understand the meaning of the question, flapping his mouth open and closed a few times.

“...No. I heard he rented it.”

“Did he rent it because you joined him?”

“What the hell? That's not important—”

“Please answer me!”

“The factory was there before I entered...”

Toshi-san drove me away with his hands, looking annoyed.

So, it wasn't a building he owned but an especially chosen and rented place. If it was prepared before Toshi-san joined, then it couldn't have been because it was near the place were the poppy flowers were planted, M High.

Why did they use that place to purify the drug? Why did he chose our streets for his experiment? Did it have a particular meaning?

The question Toshi-san dropped from his lips started to swell up inside me.

“Shushuri. Hakamizaka-san, you surely went to see Shushuri long ago...”

I stood up and grabbed Toshi-san's shoulders.

“Shushuri? You just said Shushuri, right?”

I shook his shoulders, and Toshi-san curved his lips, looking displeased.

Shushuri. That word, I'm sure I heard it from that Oshima's mouth.

“What's Shushuri?”

“It's the angel's name. Hakamizaka-san always said that.”

A connection. Hakamizaka and Oshima are connected. I knew it, Hakamizaka's words and desires were alive inside someone. My voice trembled.

“Angel? Wha-what do you mean?”

I unintentionally strangled Toshi-san's neck a little. He made a fed up face and brushed my hands off.

“I said I don't know. I was just an underling. Other guys from the group said that they could actually see Shushuri sometimes.”

They could see Shushuri sometimes? Does that mean the angels they saw when they were high? But wasn't Toshi-san high really often?

“System, my foot. Why was I the only one that wasn't taken? Only me... Me...”

Toshi-san's voice sank in a sea of bubbling oil.

Hakamizaka Shirou didn't distribute Angel Fix in the city with the goal of making money. I also heard some of the words that came from his mouth with my own ears: They used a system, he said. A system that made the drug circulate by its own power. *How stupid*, I think even now. Circulation, my foot. Wasn't that just advancing a

spiral of neglected junkies? Would something happen beyond that point? Is there still other goal left?

“Where? Where's Shushuri? Is Shushuri in that city? Is that why you scattered it there? Hakamizaka-san...”

Toshi-san was hanging his head, so I stared at the nape of his neck.

Shushuri. The name of the angel.

But I thought Oshima said “Money, to Shushuri”. Does that mean Shushuri is not something abstract, then?

Could it be... Someone's given name?

No matter how much I waited, inquired, or shook him up, Toshi-san wouldn't answer any more than that. I put on my duffle coat and stepped off the room.

Toshi-san's father was watching TV and smoking a cigarette in the small dining table, and turned his head when he noticed me.

“...Seems like you talked a lot with Toshi. Uh, you don't seem like a violent guy. If you can, would you drop by and talk to him from time to time?”

“...Eh, ah.... Okay.”

“It's getting difficult for me to keep supporting him. If he doesn't start working again soon...”

Toshi-san's father turned towards the ashtray and let the smoke out along with a sigh. I bowed and exited the apartment.

The clouded sky that was announcing a lot of snow increased the darkness; the day was already ending. I took an extensive view of the residential area from the second floor of the cheap apartment building, and just about everything looked like it was covered with ashes.

Tetsu-senpai was leaning against a roadside tree, staring at a notebook written in his own handwriting. He was wearing a jacket over his T-shirt, which was unusual for him. His muscular arms and shoulders made his body look around a size smaller. He raised his gaze as I was arriving, closing his notebook and stuffing it into his back pocket.

“How did it go with Toshi?”

“...I talked a bit with him.”

“Is that so...”

Gloomy words flowed from senpai's mouth.

“I see, I should have taken you along from the start, Narumi. I was thinking it might be tough for you to see him and stuff.”

“Well, it *was* tough to meet him. But...”

Ever since I beat him up until his face was distorted, we had been separated. I never thought I would see him again after that. We didn't have anything to talk about. But in this suffocating second reunion, the Toshi-san in my heart and the me inside Toshi-san's heart knew that they couldn't let things that way forever.

“I should have came even earlier.”

Tetsu-senpai nodded and started waking.

“I'm no good. Toshi just curled himself up. Every time I spoke, he had this scared expression that said *are you going to hit me?* Seems like you got a little closer to Toshi.”

Even though you're stronger than me, Narumi, Tetsu-senpai added, laughing.

“Let's not bring up *that* subject...”

“But you still stole a win from me!”

Tetsu-senpai hit my shoulders. I didn't really want to remember that

boxing match, so I forcibly went back to the main topic.

“As I was saying, I heard something related to Fix from Toshi-san.”

However, Tetsu-senpai stopped walking, made a curious face and looked my way, perplexed.

“...Aah, yeah. Right, Fix. You came here to get information about Fix out of him, my bad, my bad.”

“Why does it look like you are remembering that just now?” I was shocked. Tetsu-senpai slipped his hands into his jacket's pockets and started walking again, outdistancing me.

“It's just that I was satisfied just knowing that you talked with Toshi. So I couldn't think about anything but when and how would I take you again, what kind of conversation did you guys had and all that.”

While walking half a step behind Tetsu-senpai, I sighed without letting him notice. This person is also softhearted. Even though his hatred for Angel Fix would make him show his teeth, right now the feeling of concern for Toshi-san was taking precedence.

“So, what did he say? He's not doing Fix again, is he?”

Come on. The first conclusion you draw is something that worrisome? I shook my head.

“Of course not. Not at all. It seems like he remembered a few things about the manufacturing group.”

I briefly spoke to senpai about how Toshi-san had said something about *Shushuri*.

“...Shushuri? What's that?”

“I don't know, but Oshima mentioned that very same name. Only me and that girl Toritani could hear him back then so I can't really say for sure, but...”

Tetsu-senpai's face clouded, and he took out his cellphone.

“...Hiro? Where are you now? ...Aah, I see. ...No, we already finished with Toshi. Yeah, he was fine I guess. ...Yeah, with Narumi. ...Yeah, got it. By the way, can you tell me where's Toritani Shinobu staying?”

Shushuri's matter was explained to Hiro-san on the phone.

After Tetsu-senpai hung up, I asked:

“The paid dating case hasn't gone public yet, right?”

“No, not yet. Oshima is napping at the place of that unlicensed doctor that Yondaime knows. The car of the accident was somehow dealt with, and the girls who were doing paid dates are attending school as usual.”

Hiro-san reunited with the eight high school girls from the paid dating group and got information out of them. They only knew that Angel Fix was a drug that made you lose your mind, and didn't know anything related to last year's incident either. However, now we probably had new information that would help us to ask further into Oshima's connection to Hakamizaka. At any rate, as long as Oshima was still unconscious, we could only hold on to this thread.

“Should I leak this to the police...”

Tetsu-senpai made a reluctant face.

“If you do that, won't you and Yondaime get arrested?”

“No, I'd limit the information. I'd tell them there wasn't paid dating, and that it was confirmed that Oshima was taking Angel Fix...”

Can you really lead the police on like that?

“I've done it countless times already.” Tetsu-senpai quickly said. “I have failed some other times too. Well, Yondaime and I are already used to get arrested anyway.”

I only sighed in response. I wouldn't be able to do that at all. I don't have neither the ability, nor the courage, nor a reason.

Tetsu-senpai and I parted ways at the train station; he said he was going to the police station. After I saw senpai's back slipping into the crowd, I directed my steps to the Detective Agency. The night had fallen already, and I walked along the freezing asphalt.

The thought *it would have been good if I had talked a bit more with Toshi-san* was now surfacing in my mind.

If things had been a little different, the one hugging his knees going crazy in a room filled with garbage could have been me. I just had good luck. I just met the right people at the right time.

I want to help Toshi-san. It was an absurd thought, but I wanted to continue talking until it became a forgotten thing, sinking in the bottom of my heart. I'm really selfish, aren't I?

"...Shushuri?"

Alice said, turning around while taking a swig of Dr Pepper. With my report interrupted halfway through, I nodded. Her expression was indescribably bitter.

"I see... It seems like my worthless conjecture was correct."

"Conjecture?"

"I told you about it before. About the name Angel Fix being based off Tiptree's short story. Shushuri is the name of the alien that shows up in that story—In other words, the name of the angel. It doesn't feel good to have the same tastes as that man..."

After that, Alice's gaze fell to her own kneecaps.

"However, it's not likely that the Shushuri that settled down on our streets was an alien or an angel. Why in this city—Indeed, we overlooked that."

"So what could Shushuri mean? The name of a person?"

“Perhaps. I am now following the the flow of Oshima's saved money.

Alice's eyes were fixed on one of the monitors where a bunch of numbers were displayed.

“Based on the information Hiro got through the women, he should have earned approximately 8,000,000 with the badger game. However, at least in his account there hasn't been movements. There was almost no cash in the apartment where he lived, either.

“....Right, he said... 'money, to Shushuri'.”

It wasn't some metaphor? Was it something real, was it someone? Was Oshima earning money for the sake of that someone? Were the guys from the mahjong parlor and the like the same?

“Why was on these streets? And why did they let a year pass?”

Alice ruminated over my words.

“There's still not enough information. Did Toshi look like he knew anything else?”

“Eh? A-aah, no... He probably didn't have anything else to say.”

That was my wishful thinking, if anything. I didn't want to mince Toshi-san anymore.

“Hmph. Then it's no longer necessary for Tetsu and you to go back to Setagaya. We're extremely short-handed now, and now you--”

“Ahh, actually, I've been wondering if I should go to Toshi's place again...”

Alice looked at me with steady eyes.

“Why?”

“Well, because it's worrisome and dangerous. He stays confined indoors and all that.”

“I'm also a shut-in, what's so dangerous according to you?”

“No, you're different, Alice... Or not?” Or maybe his danger had a different meaning. “Anyway, that's not the point. Toshi-san is in a more critical condition. I think he needs someone to talk to.”

“Is that so?” Alice turned her back on me. “Do as you please. Of course, prioritize your duties when you have them.”

That's so cold, I thought. I assumed it was because he once turned into our enemy.

“Alice, you still can't forgive Toshi-san?”

“Forgive? What are you talking about?” The sounds of keys being pressed started, strings of characters appearing in the monitor. “I'm not a judge nor a priest. I'm not a victim nor an assailant. I'm a detective. I don't forgive nor I am forgiven. If he comes here and says he needs help, I'll accept the request. If he stays confined in his room, it's not my problem.”

“...But, he used to come to Hanamaru often, right? He was one of your friends. You don't care that he's became like that?”

“He's not my friend.” Alice said. “How many times do I have to tell you the same thing? I don't have friends. That kind of ambiguous bonds of ambiguous sentiments are unneeded for me.”

I took a step back from the bedroom and leaned my back on the side of the refrigerator.

That's right, when Min-san's case happened, she clearly said Min-san was her landlady and her tenant, but not her friend.

She lives concealing herself under unnecessary shells. Is it because she's not even able to stand up without those shells?

But, thinking about how Alice was before, I suddenly ran into a memory about the people surrounding her.

“...Didn't you say Tetsu-senpai was a close friend?”

Alice's shoulders twitched, and looked at me from the spaces between her hair.

“...Me? When? There's no way I'd say—”

“Come on, when the boxing match happened, and you intruded...”

“M-muh...”

Alice hugged a frog stuffed toy to her chest and hid half her face.

“Y-your memory is worse than that of a goldfish, why do you remember all that useless information with such detail!?”

“I think it's important, actually...”

“T-that was a state of emergency, so I had to choose short and concise words!”

Making that terrible excuse, the NEET Detective looked at me for the first time, and then she turned her back again. The state of emergency made you blurt out your real feelings, right?

“Tetsu, Hiro and Major are just detective companions, they're not my close friends. This is unnerving so stop already!”

I sighed and scratched my head. Then, something came to mind and I asked.

“And me?”

“Mh?” Alice stopped typing and looked my way.

“Well, I was just thinking 'what am I to Alice?', you know.”

A collapsing sound rumbled, the bed shook, and a great number of stuffed toys rolled on the floor. Alice had suddenly jumped back, and her back hit the mountain of stuffed toys.

“W-w-what is this all of a sudden-!?” That's my line. What is this all of a sudden?

“It's just that, we see each other really often, but I'm not sure of

what you think about me.”

Alice's face turned deep red like a habanero pepper.

“A-about you? W-why are you asking this now!? you're my assistant, an assistant detective! From the day you were born until the day you die, you're my assistant!” No, I was just a baby when I was born.

“I know that already, but I don't mean that- In other words, uhm, it doesn't seem like we're friends, right? And we're kinda different from companions, it doesn't feel quite the same as with Tetsu-senpai and the others...”

Alice spoke, burying most of her body among the stuffed toys:

“What is this? D-do you want me to think differently about you?”

Being asked that felt bothersome.

“No... Sorry. Sorry for bringing out this topic.”

I picked up the empty Dr Pepper cans to step out of the bedroom.

“Carry on! U-um.”

When I turned around at the voice, the blushing Alice with only her eyes visible in the stuffed toy rampart spoke:

“What do you think?”

“...Eh?”

“I-I'm just curious. What do you, uhm... think.... about...”

“You mean, what do I think about you?”

When I completed her question, Alice hid her face completely behind a bear and a dolphin.

“It's nothing! Just get going!”

What the heck? With the cans still under my arms, I pondered for a

short while on the side of the refrigerator, and said:

“I can't really say it in one word. I'm really grateful to you, but that isn't all. And of course, it's not just because you employ me. Anyway, I'm with you because I want to be with you.”

Alice pushed out the stuffed toy mountain and stamped her feet. What? *Just get out of here?* You were the one who asked. No, actually, I was the one who started with the subject, but oh well.

Just when I stepped out of the agency to the corridor, I noticed a figure on the other side. Bleached white hair and a red jacket were made visible under the weak fluorescent light. Yondaime.

“We caught hold of some Chigasawa Teruhiko's movements.”

Yondaime said that and pushed me back into the Agency with just his gaze.

“He sold his car? For how much?” Alice turned around on the bed.

“He made an individual deal for 1400,000. Chigasawa was rich, so he had a used Jaguar.”

Yondaime threw a report with photographs on the sheets.

“Is this that transaction?”

“Yeah. It was with a guy Chigasawa knew from University. It seems like he was in a hurry to find a buyer. 1400,000 is considerably cheap.”

I don't know much about the market price for foreign cars, but it did seem like he wanted to sell it cheaply and get the full payment.

“Did you find out how that money was used?”

“Not yet.”

“Hm. A great sum of money is vanishing into the darkness. And the

whereabouts of the cultivation notes from M High's Gardening Club that was stolen under Oshima's orders is unknown.”

Alice looked at Yondaime and then at me, who was sitting on the edge of the bed.

There was no more words after that, but we knew what she wanted to say. There's someone out there growing those poppy plants again. I shivered.

The scene of the blue flowers I had never seen swaying in the wind of a greenhouse appeared on the monitors of Alice's bedroom.

Alice let out a small sigh and turned her gaze to Yondaime again.

“Do you have a cruel request for me beyond this point?”

“...Don't say stupid things. I'll do it myself.”

I looked at their faces in turn without understanding what they were talking about. Cruel?

Yondaime turned his gaze from the monitors on the side of the the bed to the screens of the security cameras on Hanamaru's surroundings. Sitting on the bear crate by the kitchen door, Ayaka had already untied her apron.

“Is Ayaka staying until the shop closes today?”

When Yondaime asked that, I blinked.

“No... She's probably staying until nine.”

I saw Yondaime's face from the side after he gave a small nod and turned to the door, and I sprang up from the bed.

“W-wait! Please wait!”

I quickly grabbed the sleeves of the red jacket. With dreadful strength, he shook me off, making my hand hit the wall. The wolf's gaze sew me to the wall. I finally understood the meaning of their conversation. They were going to ask Ayaka for information about

the poppy flowers' cultivation.

“It's useless to ask Ayaka, she doesn't remember anything!”

“I won't know until I actually ask her.”

“Please don't make her remember! She's able to live peacefully because she forgot about everything!”

“Not my problem.”

“Wh--”

For a second a pitch-black crack appeared on my field of vision.

“Are you going to tell Ayaka what's going on to chase after the drug!?”

“Of course. Any problem with that?”

My face was covered in raging fire. In just an instant, Yondaime caught hold of my collar and forcefully pushed my back against the wall.

“What are you doing!?” Alice tumbled off the bed and rushed to us. Yondaime glared at her and said “you shut up”, then he fixed his gaze on me again.

“That's not some club activity. This is an important matter. I don't have time for your stupid concern for a classmate.”

I gritted my teeth and tried to remove Yondaime's hands from my throat, but I couldn't make him move one finger. Alice grabbed the cuff of his jacket and screamed with teary eyes:

“You barbarian! Get your hands off my assistant!”

The pressure on my neck disappeared. I collapsed on the floor with my back against the wall. Choking, I looked up at Yondaime.

“If you're going to defy me, at least be resolute.”

“I'm not defying you... I just want you to be kind to Ayaka...” I

answered in a choked voice.

“I'm just gonna talk to her.”

“That's why I'm telling you to stop, Ayaka finally returned to her ordinary life!”

“So, what do you wanna do? Are you gonna stop me with your fists?”

My words were blocked. I felt the weight and the heat of another body on the left half of my body. Alice was clinging to me. But even then, I couldn't take my eyes off of Yondaime's gaze. From the beginning, him and me didn't have the same views. He's the king of the street youth, Hinamura Souichirou.

If I stood in his way he was going to beat me to death right now, and he made me fall silent with just his glare, but he hesitated a little. He averted those eyes from me to the monitors of the security cameras and clicked his tongue. 9 o'clock in the evening had long passed, so the monitors showed Min-san delivering ramen by herself; in other words, Ayaka had gone home already.

Yondaime lifted that strong pressure on my chest, turning to the entrance. Narrowly opening the door, he turned around just once.

“We went through a sake ritual together, so I'll give you a little more time. Are you gonna become my enemy, or are you gonna keep trembling in a corner? Take your pick.”

Just those words were enough to throw me to the frozen floor. When the door closed, only Alice and I were left under the cold wind. Alice transmitted me her shaking from her arms. Unconsciously, I gently patted her head to calm her down.

“...I'm sorry, Narumi.”

A frail voice sounded under my hand. I couldn't reply.

“I won't say anything. I don't approve nor disapprove of Yondaime's words. I don't choose, I don't know. As I am a detective, I would normally be willing to hurt someone for the sake of the truth. But

this is Ayaka. And Ayaka is my... what? I don't know, but I won't choose."

She is your friend, I informed with my silence. *Ayaka is your friend. Isn't that fine?* I knew those words wouldn't reach the detective, so my voice wouldn't come out.

If you thought about it, Alice has been with Ayaka for a much longer time than me. Ayaka took care of her, touched her skin, shared her warmth with her. But Alice was a detective who had accepted Yondaime's request. She couldn't choose to go far off the truth to protect Ayaka.

If that's the case, what should I do?

Indignation was filling my heart. Opposing Yondaime to protect Ayaka, or letting Ayaka be hurt? Why do I only have those two choices? There must be something else I can do.

Isn't it fine if we investigate only the people related to Ayaka? Do we really need to crush the last remnants of some drug producers that quickly? Is a matter of pride more important than Ayaka? The answer to that question was already swirling like deep black smoke inside my chest.

"Narumi, t-that hurts."

Alice groaned under my arm.

"Ah-, s-sorry."

I had unintentionally pressed my fingers tightly on Alice's arm. When I let go of her, she pushed my body with a jerk and returned to the bed.

"...You decide."

Sitting in front of the stuffed toys, Alice muttered.

"I think it's unfitting for a employer, but I won't choose."

I silently nodded, but I didn't know what to choose either.

*

For that reason, I didn't go directly to Hanamaru after school, but I appeared at the Central Gardening Meeting first.

“Fujishima-kun, are you going to help out? Why? What's with this curious turn of events?”

With exaggerated surprise, Ayaka took me along to the greenhouse.

“It's winter so there's not much to do, but there's lot of people who haven't grown accustomed to the greenhouse yet!”

Inside the greenhouse, there was several students on duty wearing the armbands. They were mostly first years, and they bowed when Ayaka and I entered, whispering things like “Oh, look...” “Aah, Fujishima-senpai” “Shinozaki-senpai's friend” “This is unusual, what's going on?”

“Fujishima-kun came to help out! Even though he looks like this, he used to be a member of the former Gardening Club, so ask him whatever you want!”

Oi, don't hurdle me up. It's obvious there's nothing I can teach to the first years.

“Senpai, if you water them too much, the stems of the flowers won't grow, you just have to spray them a little!”

“Senpai, don't cut it to the stalk!”

“Senpai, it's winter, so increase the concentration of the liquid fertilizer, please!”

I could no longer put up with all the things they were trying to teach me. Ayaka was looking at me, giggling.

“It's seems like Fujishima-kun forgot...”

No, it's obvious that I never knew anything from the start.

When the maintenance finished and the first years left, Ayaka spoke, taking an extensive view of the neat greenhouse:

“It must have been a while since you worked in the greenhouse, right, Fujishima-kun? It's somewhat refreshing!”

I hesitated, staying by Ayaka's side. It hasn't been a while, it's the first time. Because when the Gardening Club still existed, Ayaka tended the greenhouse by herself, and I wasn't allowed to enter. The reason was because Hakamizaka Shirou had asked Ayaka to cultivate those poppy flowers in secret. That memory was sunk at the bottom of the sand.

“--But, why did you come to help out today? Could you possibly want to join the Central Gardening Meeting? Sorry, but only one person for each class is allowed to enter, and you also have your duties at the Inspection committee and as Alice's assistant...”

“No, of course not. I was just thinking it would be good to go to Hanamaru with you from time to time, and I didn't want to be waiting around like an idiot so I came to help.”

“E-eeh-?”

Ayaka's face reddened in shyness, diagonally leaning her upper body forward and looking at me from below.

“What does that mean?”

“Uuhm, you see...”

Then, I used my special swindling technique: selfishly conveying a part of the truth.

“I don't know why, but lately the guys from Hirasaka-gumi have been starting to show interest in gardening. I accidentally told them you taught me lots of stuff, and they were even in the mood to intrude into the school. If those guys come here it would be troublesome to Ayaka... So, if they come—It's not like I'm a bodyguard or anything like that, but I thought I should drive them

away.”

My muscles froze as I was talking. Every single word I said was nothing but a lie. Ayaka smiled bitterly.

“But I don't really mind? But those people seem awkward, so teaching them might be hard.”

When we were going to Hanamaru from school, I was walking beside Ayaka while pushing my bicycle, harboring the feelings of guilt and that something wasn't right about the things I couldn't say. Walking by her side, I observed Ayaka's transparent smile and I couldn't say anything in return, only postponing my conclusions.

When we were reaching Hanamaru, my cellphone rang. I looked at the name displayed on the screen: It was from Yondaime, so I stuffed the phone back in my pocket.

“...You're not going to answer?”

Entering the kitchen from the door, Ayaka tilted her head.

“Ah, no, it was just a text.”

Ayaka stepped inside with a face that said 'ohh'. I sat down on the old tire while feeling the phone vibrating. It felt like there was a living scorpion wriggling inside my pocket. I didn't know if I should pick up or not, so I could only ignore it.

What do I do? He told me that he was going to give me a little more time, but still.

By the time when the winter sun was looking like it was hiding behind the shadows of the buildings in front of the station, Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san arrived.

“I got something about Oshima from the police. They still don't know he's sleeping.”

“Where's Oshima? Shinobu-chan, Hitomi-chan and the others are worried.”

Hiro-san's current task was asking the girls that were doing paid dating under Oshima's instructions their situation, but apparently Hiro-san was inferior to Oshima regarding lady-killing.

“He was transferred to the general hospital ages ago already, but don't tell the girls. It seems like the police hasn't found out about the paid dating and the badger game stuff.”

“I know. I'll fill the cracks on those eight high school girls' hearts in

his place.”

“Don't forget your own work. And Min-san is going to hear.”

“Ahaha, it's okay. I saw her inside making sherbets so it's unlikely that she'll hear---”

“I *am* hearing though, Hiro.”

Min-san's face appeared from the kitchen door, and Hiro-san slipped down from the bear crate where he was sitting.

“What was that about eight high school girls?”

After hitting Hiro-san who could only smile bitterly without replying, Min-san returned to the kitchen.

“I offended Min-san, so it doesn't seem like I'll be able to fill the holes in her body--”

Hiro-san muttered words he shouldn't have, so the kitchen door opened once again and Min-san's kick thrust Hiro-san's back.

“Senpai, Hiro-san, are you going to order something?” With her black apron, Ayaka poked her head from the back door too.

“It's cold, so, miso ramen.”

“Ahh... Me too.”

“Okay! Miso is the most popular in winter! Fujishima-kun, are you going to eat too?”

“Ah, no, I'm fine. I'm not hungry.”

I looked over my shoulder, Ayaka smiled and nodded and then she returned to the kitchen. When the door was closed, Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai turned their gazes at my face at the same time.

“...Do you know already? ...About Yondaime?”

I asked in a way that gave myself an unpleasant feeling. Tetsu-

senpai nodded imediately, while Hiro-san showed a facial expression like he was hesitating about which words he should use, but he nodded silently in the end. My gaze fell to my own feet.

I couldn't help but asking Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san what should I do. However, unlike those two, my investigation abilities weren't anything special, and I could only waste my time, so I needed to face my own problems.

When both of them were slurping their miso ramen, I suddenly remembered something and stood up.

“I'm going to see Toshi-san.”

With his bowl on the wooden table, Tetsu-senpai arched his brows.

“Didn't we go just yesterday?”

“Yeah, but I found something I can ask him.”

I shifted my eyes to the kitchen door. The irregular sound of a kitchen knife wasn't from Min-san but from Ayaka. I was worried that she would hear, so I lowered my voice.

“Toshi-san actually received the harvested poppy flowers from someone else. In that case, he might know something about the cultivation.”

Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai looked at each other's faces.

“...Yes, could be.” Hiro-san said.

“I'll come along too. Someone has to restrict him if he starts to get violent.” Tetsu-senpai muttered. I shook my head.

“I'll go alone. It would be easier to get Toshi-san to talk that way.”

“I see.”

If I found out information connected to the production of the narcotic through another route, it could all come to an end without having to get Ayaka involved. For that purpose, I felt that I was

even able to hit Toshi-san again.

“We're obeying Alice.”

Tetsu-senpai said that, and Hiro-san nodded with a solemn expression.

“In other words, everything depends on Narumi-kun.”

Hiro-san said like he was talking to himself.

“Because we're NEETs. We don't know what to do at times like this.”

I heard those same sad words before. Even if they knew how to start rowing, these people were at a loss about how to grab the oars. So, it was up to me, the only one who wasn't a NEET.

“...See you later.”

I dragged out my bicycle and sat on the saddle.

Toshi-san's face looked better than the former day. There were several PET bottles of carbonated drinks lined up on the desk. But when I opened the curtains, I noticed his cheeks looked gaunt.

“...You haven't eaten?”

“Not hungry.” Toshi-san crushed one of the PET bottles with his hand.

“You kinda look like Alice...”

I didn't want the exchange of words to turn oppressive, so I started with striking some frivolous conversation on purpose. Toshi-san snorted and thew the PET bottle to the trash bin. There was a lot of trash already, so the pitiful green plastic that resembled a caterpillar tumbled on the floor by my side.

“What do you usually do? Do you watch TV all the time?”

I looked around the inside of the messy room.

“I mostly sleep.” Toshi-san replied, raising his knees to the chair. “I also surf the net, play games, and I go to the convenience store from time to time.”

“Oh, you're a bit healthier than Alice.”

Toshi-san didn't smile, but he narrowed his eyes as if dazzled, and unnaturally cleared his throat a couple times.

I could have a conversation without being told to leave, so I was relieved.

“Isn't this Powerebo GR?”

I picked up a game software package that was lying around. It was the home version of the baseball game that Major, the others and I got into during last summer.

“Do you play it at the arcade too? Short Pennants are very mainstream lately, but since Hiroshima is really strong, there's nothing but Hiroshima in the high scores.”

“No, I only play here online. Huh, so you play Powerebo too, Narumi.”

We started talking about the baseball game for a while. I was a quite well-known uniform designer there, so he seemed to know my designs and my nickname, and he was surprised when he found out it was me.

“If you're okay with a simple emblem, I'll draw it right away.”

“Really? I've been losing a lot and I don't have points at all, so I can't buy an emblem. Can I ask for it now?”

Then, I borrowed Toshi-san's computer, and when I showed him the emblem that looked just like Apple Corp.'s mark, he finally smiled. After that, we talked a lot about games. *I can't stay like this forever*, I told myself in my heart, but I didn't want to destroy conversation that was like a balancing toy on top of a soap bubble, so I continued

talking about Toshi-san's hobbies.

But the end would come soon.

“--So, let's go together to the arcade like before some other time. Powerebo 2MAX will come out soon, and it seems like you will be able to import your data.”

When I said that, the expression on Toshi-san's face disappeared. *Aah, I crossed the line*, I felt. Toshi-san's face steadily darkened.

“I'm sorry.”

Why am I apologizing? Am I stupid? Can't I resume the conversation?

“...Well then, what do you want to ask today?”

Toshi-san spoke in a sinister voice. His eyes were firmly staring at the thirty centimeters of empty space before my face. I turned my gaze away, hesitating.

“There's something you want to ask again, right? ...About Fix, huh?”

“No--”

I started talking and faltered. What do I gain denying it? Why am I lying? This isn't the way. I came here to find a clue to unravel this incident. I didn't come here to happily talk with Toshi-san. I was so indifferent yesterday, why am I forcing myself to laugh today? Of course, that's because my sense of purpose is a lot clearer than yesterday. Because I was thinking about deceiving him to get information out of him.

“...Yes. It's about Fix.”

I didn't look at Toshi-san's face anymore, I turned my gaze to my own lap and released my words.

“Toshi-san, you entered M High's greenhouse through the back door and talked to Ayaka, right? Did you talk about something related to

the cultivation?”

There was no response for a while. A strange feeling of disgust was seeping, and I twisted my body to brush it off. I heard a snort, a violent cough, and the creaking of a chair.

“I didn't do anything. I was just an underling, I already told you.”

“But you entered the greenhouse lots of times when they were being cultivated.”

“Just ask Ayaka.”

“I'm asking YOU because I can't ask Ayaka!!”

My voice suddenly turned rude. I sat back on the floor and hung my head in shame.

“Sorry for shouting.”

Toshi-san wiped my saliva with a tissue and threw it in the round trash bin.

“I don't want to make Ayaka remember. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. That girl's quite lucky. Hanamaru's favorite.”

Toshi-san spoke in a dispirited complaining voice.

“I couldn't do anything. Anything at all. Things just.... turned out that way.”

They didn't 'turned out that way'. You took the drugs yourself. I pushed the need of telling him that back into my throat, and inquired with all my patience:

“Anything about the greenhouse will do. Whatever you remember, please tell me.”

“Nothing at all. I don't know anything you would want to know. I only passed over the reports that Ayaka wrote every time to Hakamizaka-san. Then the guy plucked the flowers that had turned

blue and that was it.”

“Reports? About what?” I sprang up again.

“I caught a glimpse once but I didn't understand a word. I know nothing about botany. Obviously.”

I chewed up the words and sat down once again.

“Hey... You get it, right? I was treated as small fry under Hakamizaka-san. He never entrusted me with anything important. Haha. That's why I didn't take the last amount of drug left, I was put on probation, and now I'm like this, alive. I survived. Shit. What a joke. Why? Why...?”

Toshi-san buried his face in his kneecaps. His voice that didn't turn into words fell to the floor.

When I exited the apartment, I noticed another call from Yondaime. Hearing the 'Whatever, I'll go to Hanamaru later' recorded in the answering machine, I squatted at the side of the bicycle and hid my head under my arms. Cold was started to creep up, so I straightened my duffle coat. After meditating for a while about my behavior, I thought *I'm the worst no matter how you look at it*. I informed Alice about my conversation with Toshi-san by mail, and then I decided to go home.

“Why are you here so early? I didn't cook for you.”

As soon as I opened the front door, the cold words of my sister flew to me. However, since I'm so disastrous that it was indeed unusual for me to return home early, I couldn't complain.

Slurping cup noodles while leaning on the kitchen's sink, I felt extremely regretful. What am I running away from? What do I gain by running away? Would the current situation change for the better if I delay it?

I glanced at the cellphone on the table. I won't get a phone call from anyone. No one else except me would make a choice to speed

things up. But now I can only keep this stubborn silence stretching tortuously. Alice, Tetsu-senpai and the others told me that the decision was up to me, so since right now I haven't chosen, I obviously don't have any words to say.

When I finished eating, I crushed the cup and threw it to the trash bin and fell prostrated on the sofa. In my fatigue, I got immersed in Toshi-san's sticky eyes and Yondaime's completely passionless voice mixed together. Like that, I fell asleep.

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The next morning, when I showed up at the classroom of the 2-4 class, Ayaka noticed my evident mood change.

“Good morning, Fujishima-kun.”

I was just being greeted, but an uneasy feeling crept up my back.

“...Morning.”

I know this fake cheerfulness quite well, I thought. The way she smiled while slopingly turning her body around, I've seen that gesture some time ago. *Oi, please stop that*, I thought. The slow me from the past wouldn't have noticed, right?

“You didn't go back to the shop and went home directly yesterday, right?”

“Ah, y-yeah.”

“Everyone was worried about you, Fujishima-kun.”

“Worried? ...Why?”

“Because, you know-”

When Ayaka said that, the bell rang.

The classroom was filled sounds of the chairs being pulled back, making us swallow our conversation. I reluctantly sat down.

While in class, Ayaka glanced at me from her seat looking like she wanted to tell me something, but that day we had P.E. and elective classes, so in the end we didn't get a chance to exchange words until school ended.

“Fujishima-kun, Fujishima-kun” Ayaka called me. “There's no activities at the greenhouse today, so let's go to Hanamaru together.”

I mumbled, but didn't say anything in the end.

“Those two are getting along really well lately...” “It feels like a stable period” “But Fujishima-kun should be more...” “No, he seems more like a lolicon.” “I heard he's gay, though.”

Turning me back on my classmates' inexcusable conversation, Ayaka pulled my arm.

“Hey, hey, Fujishima-kun, why do you never bring your bag?”

As soon as we passed the school gates, Ayaka indiscreetly asked something ridiculous.

“That's not true, I do bring it from time to time.” I replied while pushing my bicycle. “It's just that I overslept and left home as quickly as I could. All the textbooks are at school anyway.”

“If you don't review the lessons, you'll repeat the year!”

Ayaka showed me her knitted brows as if purposely, and then she immediately patted my shoulders with a broad smile.

“What are you going to do if you really repeat, Fujishima-kun?”

“Hmm. I'll probably drop out...”

If you have something to tell me, why are you going around in circles?, I

suspected, but on the other hand I felt relieved that she didn't get straight to the point.

“You'll drop out and become a NEET? A gigolo like Hiro-san? If you're going to do that, I'll tell Min-san so she'll give you a huge scolding.”

“Why do you take becoming a gigolo as my first option!? It's obvious I couldn't do that!” I made a displeased look. “Well, I don't really have a clear aim, though.”

“Aren't you going to continue your job as an assistant detective?”

“You can't call that a job. It's not stable at all. Alice apparently earns quite a lot, though.”

“But, but, Fujishima-kun, everyone's been relying on you a lot lately...”

Ayaka's tone of voice and the color of her smiling face changed just a little.

“You're already a splendid assistant detective. If you become a NEET like this, that job is perfect for you.”

I'm not splendid at all-, I replied in my heart. I even ran away from Yondaime yesterday. Even though I've been entrusted with a decision that only I could make, I'm still running away. It's always like that. I'm unable to hide this weakness at the most crucial times. I'm only capable of deceiving and deceiving, and that won't make the world Alice lives in any gentler.

“That's why, I... Won't stand in your way anymore.”

“...Stand in my way? What are you--”

“I won't say things like 'it's dangerous, so stop' anymore. In exchange for that, I want you to solve this case quickly, there are things that only you can do to help, aren't there?”

I stood still. Walking three steps in front of me, Ayaka looked over her shoulder with a curious face.

“Fujishima-kun?”

“Help? Why? Why are you saying that, Ayaka?”

My ears buzzed, and the sounds of the world felt far off.

“You know, everyone reunited yesterday, and Yondaime came too, and asked me lots of things. About the time I grew those poppy flowers, and about that florist that used--”

I grabbed both Ayaka's arms. The bicycle lost its support and collapsed on the sidewalk, but I didn't feel like stopping it from falling. Ayaka's face half buried in the scarf stiffened, and she widened her eyes.

“Yondaime asked *what*!? About... The past? But Ayaka, Ayaka is--”

“I-it hurts, Fujishima-kun.”

Ayaka twisted her body, escaping from my hands and she picked up the bicycle. With her eyes averted, she spoke difficultly:

“...You see. ...I remembered a little bit. I used to take care of the greenhouse, and...”

She was remembering. Little by little, Ayaka was remembering those days. Up to what point?

“I was really surprised when he told me that I have brother... Ahaha. I do, huh...”

I snatched the bicycle's handle from Ayaka's hands and jumped upon the saddle.

“Fujishima-kun, what's going on!?”

I rejected Ayaka's voice behind me, and turned to the opposite direction of Hanamaru. In the cold wind, the pedals felt as heavy as packed snow.

Yondaime was at Hirasaka-gumi's office. When I pushed the iron door open and rushed into the reception room, the large underlings who were surrounding the executive desk turned around, bowing at the same time.

“Aniki, thanks for your hard work!” “Thanks for your hard work!”

Sitting further in the middle of the black-shirted men, Yondaime glared at me, making me freeze. But Yondaime immediately removed his gaze from me and returned to give instructions to his underlings.

“These are pictures of the whole crew. This is Hakamizaka, this is Chigasawa, and these are the mahjong bears. Ask around thoroughly. Don't assault the florist.”

“Understood!!” “We shall now hone out manly aura!”

The lackeys took a step back and glanced at me. I gulped and mustered up enough courage to get close to Yondaime.

“Why are you here?”

“What did you ask Ayaka?”

“Didn't she tell you herself? Isn't she your classmate?”

“Didn't I tell you that I didn't want to get Ayaka involved!?”

“I also told you I'd give you time to make a choice.”

Yondaime stood up. I realized the noisy black shirts behind me were stepping back closer to the wall.

“You didn't answer your phone, and I stayed at Hanamaru until 24:00 but you didn't come. How would I know what you had to say?”

I bit my lip until it bled. It's true. I ran away.

“Cool your head. What's so bad about her getting her memories back? Leaving that aside, Fix--”

My field of vision was dyed red for a second. I slapped the executive desk with both hands. Yondaime didn't move an inch, but Pole and Rocky were startled and jumped up.

“...You're saying that because you didn't see how Ayaka was back then!”

A threatening voice that made even myself shiver leaked out from my throat.

“That's true. I don't have time to waste caring about leaving things out. I asked you why are you here.”

Why—Why am I here? I hardened my fists on the desk. Did I come to moan in anger like a brat? No, that's not it. It's Ayaka. It's for Ayaka. Didn't I come here to know what I could do for Ayaka's sake?

But the words wouldn't leave my throat. The sound of the iron door being opened hit my withering back.

“Ah...” The black-shirted men groaned.

“Ane-san.”

“Ane-san, Ojiki, thanks for your hard work!”

“Thanks for your hard work!”

I widened my eyes and straightened my body, turning around. Walking forward dressed in a gown, Alice's swaying black hair didn't have a sense of reality at all. Even though she came by my side and tightly grabbed the hem of my coat, her warmth seemed far away, making me feel like Alice wasn't really here. I looked at Hiro-san who was leaning against the side of the entrance and I understood that he probably took her along in his car, but I still couldn't recognize Alice's existence in this reality.

Why—Why is Alice here?

“Ayaka called me on the phone. You fool.”

Alice muttered, leaning closely, and I averted my gaze from Yondaime.

“Why are you here too? You came to fetch your pet cat?”

Yondaime cursed, correcting his posture on the chair.

“I only came to ascertain my assistant's decision.”

Alice answered in a shaking voice. After that, she looked up at me, and spoke in a tender voice:

“It's okay, Narumi. It's your own decision and that's fine. We are failures anyway. This is what was written on our pages in God's notebook. Nevertheless, you can decide.”

What the hell is this? I thought. *Why did it turn out like this? Why don't we have an option other than being cornered in that hopeless place?*

Why, indeed—Alice's following words soaked my overheating heart.

“Because this is your case. A case you still haven't put an end to. Isn't that correct? So, go ahead and choose.”

My problem.

In order to end the sequel of the winter when I was sixteen, I can only make a decision. Even if my only choices were immensely stupid.

I firmly swallowed. My dry throat felt rough. I stared at Yondaime right in front of me, accepted the blade of his gaze, waited for the pain to be deeply impressed in my heart, and released my words:

“If he intends to get Ayaka involved beyond this point, Yondaime is my enemy.”

I heard Pole or someone else gasping. Yondaime spoke:

“I won't adhere to your stupid assumptions. We're still not at the last stage, of course I intend to involve her.”

“Understood.”

Why did it turn out like this? Shouldn't it be other ways to handle things? Those thoughts washed away that empty anger.

“I take back our sake ritual.”

“Aniki-!” “Aniki, that's-!”

Pole and Rocky edged closer to the right and left side of the executive desk and looked at me with pales faces. At that moment, Yondaime swung his fists downwards on the desk. The dreadful sound of wood cracking made the whole office gasp.

“Silence.”

The wolf eyes turned to Alice.

“Fine. The go-between is also here.” His gaze returned to me. “From this moment on, you're a complete stranger. Hurry up and get lost.”

“Sou-san, please calm down!”

The instant Pole spoke, Yondaime's fists punched his bulky chest, making his large body hit the wall, and a picture frame fell with a crash. The sound of broken glass made me draw back my body.

“Our business haven't finished yet.”

Alice said peacefully.

“What are you going to do with my request?”

“Isn't it obvious it's canceled? Calculate the research expenses.”

Alice's hands weakly tightened their grip.

“Understood. Give back the manuscripts and the original data, please.”

Alice picked up the profile sheets from Hakamizaka, Chigasawa and the mahjong bears and a DVD-R, handing them to me. Those were all things that came from the Detective Agency.

“I already printed and distributed them.” Yondaime narrowed his eyed.

“I don't mind. Let's go, Narumi.”

As soon as we stepped out of the office, I heard the sound of rough footsteps going down the stairs.

“Aniki!” “Aniki, please wait!”

The black shirts stepped into the road and surrounded me. I got scared and pushed Alice into Hiro-san's car.

“Aniki, what's going on!?” “What's that about taking back the sake ritual!?” “Did something happen with Sou-san!?”

I hesitated. *I'm not your Aniki anymore*, I said in my heart. When Yondaime told me that I was a complete stranger, it felt like rain was pouring in my face, but now I felt tormented by the downhearted feeling of loneliness.

“I'm sorry.” I bowed my head.

Why am I apologizing? This is nothing I should apologize for, what good will apologizing do? I condemned myself again and again.

“Please, don't apologize, Aniki!”

“Let's apologize together to Sou-san instead!”

“No.”

Without raising my head, I shook it in refusal.

“No one did anything wrong. Please stop.”

I rushed to the roadside where my bicycle was parked. When I passed by Alice in the car, her eyes met mine for a second.

I threw the bunch of documents and DVDs into the basket and sat on the saddle.

If I had gone to Hanamaru and exchanged words with Yondaime, answering all his questions... I changed the events countless times in my head, repeated them, ruminated. There weren't mistakes anywhere. I made the right choice, and the regrets were necessary.

The pain oozing from my ribs rose to the surface. I knew it quite well, the pain of a loss carved deep in my body and my heart.

Before I knew it, being that person's sworn brother became something so important inside me, huh, I thought.

It all started with... Oh yeah, a play of words to get him to shelter Meo.

When did I start to depend so much on him? Always giving me his support without asking anything in return.

And like that, I destroyed that bond myself.

I destroyed it. I am now that person's enemy.

Unable to control my pain, I grasped the handle tightly and slowly slid downhill. Soon I became unable to straighten my body, and felt like I was going to fall into the basket. I couldn't care about the puzzled gazes of the people that passed by me from time to time.

When I reached Hanamaru's kitchen door and pushed my bicycle further inside, the door opened and Ayaka rushed in with her black apron.

“Fujishima-kun-! Wh-what's wrong? Did you go to Yondaime's place?”

“A-aah... Yeah... It's nothing.”

“What do you mean by 'it's nothing'?”

“It's okay, I already talked to Yondaime. It's nothing you should be worried about, Ayaka.”

“What happened? W-was it something I said--”

I shook my head and pushed my bicycle further between the buildings and Ayaka rushed over and caught hold of the basket to restrain me.

“Wait! I won't understand if you don't tell me anything!”

Why are you trying to make me explain something I can't explain? When I turned my back to Ayaka and forcibly turned the handle, the tire slipped, and the bicycle collapsed sideways. The documents and DVDs that leaped out of the basket were scattered on the ground.

“Ah-, I-I'm sorry.”

Ayaka became pale and leaned over to pick up the documents. I was taken aback and tried to avoid it, but it was too late. Ayaka's hands holding one of the papers were shaking. Her eyes widened unnaturally. The profiles printed on the paper were from Hakamizaka and Chigasawa—Members of Fix's manufacturing/ selling group.

“Uh....uh-eugh-...!”

Ayaka let out a strange cry. I snatched those documents away from her and crushed them with my hands.

“A-are you okay-!?”

Ayaka curled up, frightened.

There was a picture of the very person who once forced her to take the drug. Even though I knew that she would end up remembering if I was too careless...

“Oi, Narumi, what are you d--”

The kitchen door opened vigorously and Min-san appeared. When she noticed Ayaka having muscular convulsions and vomiting gastric juice on the ground, she rushed in immediately and rubbed her back. She glared at me and yelled “Take that stuff away already!”

For a while, my knees were shaking and I couldn't move. I finally straightened my body when Min-san slapped my cheek, and I rushed up the emergency stairs as if running away.

The Detective Agency was locked; they hadn't returned yet. The traffic in the highway was probably congested. I leaned over in front of the washing machine. Until Hiro-san brought Alice back, I squatted on the corridor, drenched in lethargy.

Sitting on the bed of the Detective Agency, under the wind of the conditioned air, I hugged my knees.

Alice who had just returned was facing the keyboard without saying a word. Hiro-san returned from the kitchen with two cups of hot coffee, handing me one of them.

“Did something happen with Ayaka? She didn't look good, and Min-san seemed angry.”

“...Y-yeah. Just a little something.” I lied. I didn't know how to explain it. I drank a sip of coffee. The heat only reached the base of my tongue.

I certainly picked the worst choice for Ayaka.

Well, what do I do? Should I chase away the Hirasaka-gumi's lackeys who will probably come to get more information from Ayaka? What should I do if Yondaime comes himself? Who would be able to stop him?

Should I tell Ayaka to stop coming to Hanamaru? How stupid. I don't have the right to do that. What good will it do to meddle into Ayaka's daily life?

I pressed my forehead in my arms, hearing the sound of Alice typing.

What in the world have I done? What was the meaning of this? I turned Yondaime into my enemy, satisfying my own ego with the excuse of not wanting Ayaka to get involved so she wouldn't be

harmed, but didn't that go nowhere? Where would my choice lead?

I wasn't thinking at all. I only discharged my fury. I snatched away Alice's reason to seek for the truth, because if there wasn't a request, the detective would remain a powerless bystander.

Sinking deeper and deeper into the mud, the surface of my heart was scratched by a shrill noise.

I raised my face and looked around, my head unable to comprehend what sound it was at first. But when I noticed Alice's gaze had turned towards the entrance, I understood it was the sound of the intercom.

Hiro-san rushed to the entrance with an 'I'll get it' and opened the door.

With both hands in his jacket's pockets, Tetsu-senpai's figure appeared.

When senpai pushed Hiro-san aside and entered the bedroom, he looked at me for an instant and immediately gazed at the small back wrapped in black hair.

Slipping his hands out of his pockets, he threw something by Alice's side. I gasped. When Alice turned and saw what that something was, she frowned.

“...What is that?”

“Take care of that for me. Don't ask how I gathered it.”

It was a roll of 10,000 yen notes tied with a rubber band. ...How much money is there? It looks quite thick.

“I am a NEET Detective, a messenger of the deceased. Not a bank.”

“It's an advanced payment for the investigation expenses. If I keep it I'll end up wasting it on horse racing betting tickets, so you keep it, Alice.”

Alice and I stared at Tetsu-senpai's face at the same time. A weak

smile came from him.

“This is a request from me. Destroy Angel Fix completely.”

Alice picked up the roll of banknotes, pushing it against her pajama-clad chest.

“...Senpai...”

A gooey voice overflowed from my throat.

“What's with that disheartened face?” Tetsu-senpai turned to me and showed his teeth. “This is not only your case, and it's not only Yondaime's case either. Don't you guys look down on me.”

“Quite the arrogant words coming from someone who just got covered in debts.” Hiro-san said, laughing.

“Oh, shut up.”

Debts... He got in debt to pay for the request fee?

“Hmph. Don't underestimate a NEET Detective either. This amount will vanish in a second.”

Alice threw the roll of banknotes to my knees.

“Hurry up and count it, Narumi.”

“...Eh.... Ah- okay.”

“However, since we won't use Hirasaka-gumi, it might last. Very well, I accept.”

We won't use Hirasaka-gumi?

I stared at Alice's face, and she looked back at me with an amazed expression.

“Why are you giving me that stupid look? Do you still not understand the way we do things? If we locate Angel Fix's last remnants without relying on Hirasaka-gumi, we will end this case completely. There is no other option.”

Alice's words slowly soaked into my swelled up consciousness.

Yes. It's just like that. There's no other way.

We need to force out the truth with our own hands before Yondaime.

I quietly picked up the roll of banknotes. Those scraps of paper drenched in Tetsu-senpai's blood and will felt incredibly heavy.

Chapter 4

Angel Flowers' Workshop was the peculiar name of that flower shop.

The roof of a greenhouse could be seen on the wide garden of a single house located near a high-rent district's main street.

Greenhouse, I thought. It shouldn't be strange for a gardening enthusiast to have a greenhouse in their house, but even so, I gazed at the glass-sided triangular roof basking in the winter sun with a complicated feeling.

The gatepost had a copper plate with a sculpted relief of an angel; a lovely angel spreading his wings and blowing a trumpet.

It didn't seem like a coincidence anymore.

I remembered the design of the wings carved on the red pills. Aren't they really similar to the wings on this doorplate? Did Hakamizaka Shirou decide to give the drug the name of an angel upon seeing this? I don't know. I might be jumping into conclusions.

I looked behind the fence. In the spacious front garden, I saw a tiered stand full of poinsettias. There were several female customers in the verandah that served as the open shop. Friendly chatting with the customers in the middle, a woman who specially stood out was facing this way. She had neatly arranged short hair, big earrings, and exotic features that somehow gave the impression that she was Greek or Turkish. Without even needing to compare her to the data, I knew who she was at first glance: Iharagi Junko.

I remembered Alice's words from the NEET Detective Squad meeting we had had the former day.

*

“Using the information Yondaime got from Ayaka might be complicated for you” Alice quickly glanced at me. “But it's a potential clue, so we must use it.”

After that, Alice's fingers ran over the keyboard. The profile of a woman was displayed on the monitors surrounding the bed.

Iharagi Junko. 38 years old. Mother of one child, divorced from her husband. As a gardening researcher, she has appeared on TV a number of times, she also wrote numerous books. She manages a shop named Angel Flowers' Workshop, ten minutes away from M High.

Back when the Gardening Club existed, Ayaka relied on that shop to cultivate those unique poppy flowers.

“Is it a shop Ayaka knew from before? Or did Hakamizaka Shirou tell her about it?”

I asked, caught between the feeling of not wanting to touch the subject and wanting to dig up the truth.

“It seems like she doesn't remember. Almost all the memories related to Fix have vanished inside her.”

Hakamizaka Shirou.... And Toshi-san. Ayaka's memories about being entrusted with the sin of growing those blue poppy flowers.

But they might return, I thought. It's obvious. She's been living just like before, taking care of the plants in the greenhouse, so there's a connection with the past somewhere.

“However, there's a high possibility that Hakamizaka introduced the shop to her. Ayaka apparently purchased quite a few unusual and expensive gardening medicines from that shop. It was unlikely that the school's Gardening Club had that many medicines. They barely use them now, actually.”

It would be better to confirm more with Ayaka--No one said that. We had chosen that winding road on our detective work to avoid that, after all.

“So this woman is Hakamizaka's acquaintance? If so, the police might have tracked her last year.”

Tetsu-senpai folded his arms.

“See if you can find out anything, Tetsu. We also need to meet Iharagi Junko in person, we have no time to waste.”

“If she's a widow, then it's my turn. Since she's so beautiful, I'm itching to put my skills to use.”

Smiling brightly, Hiro-san raised his thumb and pointed at himself.

“No, I'll go.” I interjected, and Hiro-san widened his eyes exaggeratedly and looked at me.

“Why? I mean, I know your gigolo skills have far surpassed mine, Narumi-kun, but you're not even 18 yet, are you?”

I had so many things to retort that I gave up and began explaining instead.

“I'm an M High student and I was in the gardening club, so I can easily make up an excuse to enter that shop. If you approach her as an outsider, even if you get close to her it will take time.”

Well, that's true... Hiro-san muttered.

“So, will I be informed when you enter the widow's bedroom at least, Narumi-kun?”

“Hiro, that's enough!” “I'm being serious now!”

Hiro-san pursed his lips and shrugged. Hasn't he learned a lesson after all the times Min-san hit him?

“Okay then, I'll ask the ladies I know if they know something about Iharagi Junko and all that.”

“Alright, let's go.”

Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san turned to the entrance.

“By the way, where's Major?” I asked.

“I talked to him on the phone just now. He's installing bugs and cameras in Iharagi Junko's house.” Alice nonchalantly answered.

“That's, uhm... Well, it's too late to say this, but.... Isn't what Major's doing a crime?”

“Indeed, it's too late to say that, Narumi-kun.” “Hiro's existence is a crime in itself.” “Tetsu, aren't you a genuine criminal? You even have a criminal record.” “It's not a criminal record, it's just a correctional guidance history.”

They both exited the Agency while arguing. I watched them leave, still sitting on the bed.

Yes, it's too late to think about it now, but we *are* doing illegal acts. The reason I was worrying this time was because we weren't certain that this woman, Iharagi Junko, was our enemy. Since our partners are always yakuza/mafia hoodlums, the reluctance to brush with the law is numbed.

“Hmph. How foolish. A crime is a crime, no matter who your partner is. It's seriously too late to think about it.”

Seeing through my thoughts, Alice looked at me with scornful eyes.

“No, I know, but...”

I still didn't feel convinced. Iharagi Junko seemed like an ordinary person.

“Iharagi Junko had a reason to accept money from the Fix manufacturing group, at least.”

Alice said, staring at the monitor.

“If those poppies are being cultivated again now, then she might be like Ayaka was before, thinking the fertilizers are something necessary.”

“So...” I gulped, looking at the neat smile on the photograph.

“Could that woman be *Shushuri*?”

“There's a possibility that it is indeed that person's nickname.”

I folded my arms, breathed through my nose, and then exhaled.

“If that's the case, then it would explain why the drug was scattered on these streets, right...?”

Because Shushuri is in this city. Hakamizaka and the others got together near Shushuri's flower shop, they created the narcotic factory, then they noticed the greenhouse in the school that was really near, so they got closer to Ayaka's brother, Toshi-san.

“Let's not jump into conclusions so hastily.”

Alice glanced at me from the side, taking a sip of Dr Pepper.

“There are still lots of questions. If we don't disentangle them one by one, we're going to misread the truth.”

But we were indeed pressed for time. Yondaime's intense gaze and Ayaka's uneasy eyes flickered somewhere in my head. I licked my lips and asked:

“What are those other questions?”

“First of all, why now after a whole year.”

“Aah...” I also wondered the same before. Why did people with saved up fix suddenly started to move at the same time? And they all seemed to need to get money urgently. Now, after the four seasons passed, something set in motion that incident, which should be immersed in the darkness already, for a second time. But what?

“And there's something else...”

Alice's voice became deeper and more majestic.

“I'm curious about why Hakamizaka Shirou needed Ayaka's greenhouse.”

“...Eh?”

I took a good look at the detective's face.

“What do you mean? Isn't that because he needed to cultivate the flowers that served as the raw materials?”

“There were lots of Angel Fix supplies before Ayaka and Toshi took part on the manufacturing. Hakamizaka had other large-scale cultivation places. The police made that public on their investigation. M High's greenhouse wasn't such an important area. Why did he use it?”

“Weren't the raw materials insufficient? Maybe he wanted to increase the production a bit more...”

“That reason was satisfying for me last year, but the circumstances are different now. There's the fact that Ayaka frequented Angel Flowers' Workshop, and more importantly, Toshi's testimony.”

Toshi-san's testimony?

“He said he periodically went to the greenhouse and took a report written by Ayaka along with the flowers that had turned blue.”

“Yes, but, wasn't that also because of the raw materials? I can't think of anything else.”

“No--”

Alice shut her mouth mid-sentence, and her face clouded.

“Let's drop this subject. Now is not the time to turn it into words.”

The detective forsook my doubts with cool-headed words.

“Anyway, Iharagi Junko. We should look for her connection with Hakamizaka.”

“...Alright.”

I stood up from the bed and hung my head in shame, placing my

hands on the wall.

“What's the matter?”

“...Aah, well... I said all those courageous words to Hiro-san, but I have no idea how should I get information out of her.”

Alice sighed unnaturally.

“You can just ask. For example, *'were you an acquaintance of the main criminal responsible of the narcotic manufacturing, Hakamizaka Shirou?'*, and the like.”

“Eeeeeh?!” I unintentionally let out a hysterical voice, turning my head back at Alice. The detective shrugged.

“It's not a situation where you have to do cunning questioning. Trick her into telling the truth with whatever method you please. Isn't lying through your teeth your signature move? If she contacts anyone or disposes of anything, it will be caught in Major's antennas. Right now, that's what should get us the best results.

“Ah...”

That's right. So that's why the bugs were prepared so quickly? Sounds somewhat tiring. In the end, my only duty is making up an excuse to shake up Iharagi Junko, huh? And even Alice has clearly told me that lying through my teeth is my signature move.

But it can't be helped. Because it's indeed the only thing I can do.

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Standing in front of Angel Flowers' Workshop, after I finished remembering every word Alice said, I looked at the garden behind the gate once again. The leisured ladies were holding potted plants in their hands, asking things to Iharagi Junko. To make matters worse, there were also two young girls inside, wearing light blue

aprons with a picture of an angel printed on them. They were probably from the staff of the shop.

What should I do? There's no atmosphere to ask her if she's acquainted with the main criminal responsible of the narcotic manufacturing, and it doesn't seem like the ladies are going to leave soon.

Aah—No, I don't have to worry so much, I realized. I should attack as it is. I only have to shake her up.

Even though I was reassuring myself in my head, it took me a while to finally take action. I took four deep breaths, removed the gloves from my sweaty palms, opened my duffle coat feeling the cold wind on my chest, and upon calming down, I walked through the gate.

“Excuse me....”

“Welcome.” “Welcome!”

The two young employees saw me first. Iharagi Junko turned her gaze at me next, and all the ladies looked our way. Their facial expressions fell a little. It wasn't a place that many high school boys in uniforms visited.

“Go ahead, feel free to look around as you please.”

Iharagi Junko's gentle smile returned as she said that. I looked at the other women and took a step closer to Iharagi, beginning to talk:

“Uhm, I'm from M High's Gardening Club. Do you remember a girl who bought lots of things and asked advice from you last year, Shinozaki Ayaka?”

Her face wasn't clouded, just genuinely pensive.

“...Aah! Shinozaki-san. I remember her, yes. However, I haven't seen her lately, could it be that she stopped working with flowers?”

I felt a little disappointed. So she admits knowing Ayaka so easily?

“How can I help you today?”

When I was asked that, my suspicions started to grow thin. Isn't this person just an horticulturist? Isn't she just a good citizen unrelated to Hakamizaka who knew Ayaka beforehand? Aren't our deductions wrong? But there's no time. In this very moment, those poppy flowers are being cultivated, their juices are being extracted, purified and made into pills, and Hirasaka-gumi is sniffing around for that place.

With those thoughts racing, I squeezed out my words.

“...Do you know a man called Hakamizaka Shirou?”

Iharagi Junko's smile cracked. I was even more surprised.

“Y-you... Hakamizaka-san... Are you.... Hakamizaka-san's....”

The words in her question vanished into nothing.

“Sensei, what's the matter?” “Is something wrong?”

The customers spoke with suspicious faces. Iharagi Junko bowed at them, then she turned around to look at the employees on the sides of the verandah.

“Please, look after the customers for a minute. I need to help this person.”

She turned around at me again and took a step closer, pointing at the front door of the house.

“...Please, let's talk about this inside.”

I entered the bright living room. The walls were covered with hung baskets with dry flowers. It was an elegant but unsettling room. A strong herbal fragrance was also hanging in the air.

“Please have a seat.”

Iharagi Junko placed a cup of black tea on the table. I sat in front of her, and the silence mixed and danced mid-air along with the steam

of the black tea.

“...Sorry for suddenly barging in and saying weird things.”

I suddenly flat-out apologized.

“No, it's nothing...”

Iharagi Junko casted her eyes down. I just couldn't see her as someone related to narcotics manufacturing at all. Our deductions must be wrong indeed...

“So... Were you an acquaintance of Hakamizaka Shirou?”

I couldn't hold it anymore, so I inquired directly. Her shoulders twitched when she heard the name Hakamizaka. With a hesitation that didn't match her 38 years of age, she raised her gaze again.

“Before that, uhm, are you really from M High....?”

“Ah, I-I'm sorry. My name is Fujishima Narumi.” I bowed my head. “I'm Shinozaki-san's classmate, and I used to be in the Gardening Club with her.”

“I see, but, how do you know about Hakamizaka-san?”

“I'm an assistant detective.”

Iharagi Junko tilted her head. She probably wasn't used to hearing the term 'assistant detective.' I continued talking:

“There was a disturbance related to narcotics a year ago... I'm investigating that.”

“Wh....Why? Aren't you a high school student? And the police has dealt with that incident a long time ago...”

“Many companions of mine had died because of that drug. Even a person that was related to the group of criminals is dying and still suffering now.”

A part of that wasn't a lie. She lowered her gaze at the serious

subject.

“...I see.... Hakamizaka-san also died because of that...”

She won't even feign ignorance about that, I thought.

“How did you get to know Hakamizaka?”

I patiently repeated my question. Iharagi Junko finally raised her head.

“He was a regular customer. He started using them by the time he went to Iran, but since he was a graduate from a Japanese university, there were many fertilizers he couldn't buy, he used my shop.”

“Is... that all?”

“Yes...”

Iharagi Junko tilted her head with a doubtful expression.

“I told all that to the police. They also inspected my shop and my greenhouse. Why are you investigating now...? It's been a year, hasn't it?”

So the police also found out about this woman? I was a little surprised, but I concealed that feeling. It was obvious if you thought about it. If the fertilizers used were so unusual they would obviously leave clues, and the police definitely wouldn't overlook them.

If despite that the crime wasn't solved, then this person really isn't Shushuri?

No, I reconsidered. There's still one source of the raw material that the police didn't find out. Ayaka.

“Do you know what kind of relationship did Hakamizaka and Shinozaki-san have?”

When I asked that, Iharagi Junko's facial expression didn't change

much.

“Hakamizaka-san introduced this shop to Shinozaki-san... And they bought almost the same fertilizers.”

Iharagi Junko stopped mid-sentence and gasped.

“...It couldn't be... Shinozaki-san was involved in that incident? Aah, but, right, was she growing the same flowers? I can't believe it....”

I was almost equally surprised. Is she only realizing now that Ayaka was growing those flowers that served as the narcotics raw materials? Does she really not know anything, or is she acting? Should I insist on talking about Ayaka? No, I shouldn't expose myself so fecklessly.

“So, Ayaka hasn't come here at all, right? Until when did Hakamizaka come? Hasn't any of Hakamizaka's acquaintances come here lately?”

I half rose from my seat, interrogating her. Iharagi Junko cast her eyes down, shaking her head many times.

“No one came. I already told everything to the police a year ago.”

When I was about to question further, I heard tapping footsteps behind me, and the sound of a door being vigorously opened.

“Mama! A friend of Shirou-san came again?”

Iharagi Junko widened her eyes and stood up. I gasped and drew my chair back, turning around. A little boy carrying a backpack on his back and wearing a jumper came rushing into the living room. When his eyes met mine, he stood still and bowed his head with a “Good afternoon”. After that, he shifted his focus to Iharagi Junko.

“Are you Shirou-san's friend?”

“Wh—What is this boy saying-?”

Iharagi Junko went around the table and rushed to the little boy,

catching him by the shoulders and pushing him to the door.

“Go wash your hands and go to your room, okay?”

“He's Shirou-san's friend, right? The ladies outside were saying he said something about Hakamizaka Shirou.”

“Tomoki!” Iharagi Junko shrieked. “W-what are you saying!? Anyway, just go!”

I approached that boy named Tomoki, but Iharagi Junko stood in the middle.

“P-please leave! I have nothing else to tell you!”

Tomoki-kun looked like he had something to say behind her mother.

“Tomoki, do as I say!”

With her mother's scolding voice, the back carrying a satchel disappeared through the door again.

When I stepped out of Angel Flowers' Workshop, I stopped the IC recorder in my breast pocket. My suspicions had now turned into pitch black clouds, covering my thoughts.

That boy—Iharagi Junko's son—said ′A friend of Shirou-san came *again*?′ In other words, someone came before.

So, is this woman indeed Shushuri? The angel who haunted these streets, scattering words of temptation and death through those red pills?

I didn't know how to corner a person that not even the police investigation could catch, but I had the Detective Squad who didn't mind doing illegal activities. It wasn't like their purpose was being dragged to the court, but they had to do something by any means.

When I went back to the crossroad corner where my bicycle, I saw a silhouette approaching a few meters ahead. I practically collapsed over the bike, and I put my arms on the hedge to support my body.

It was Yondaime.

His hair that was usually standing on end was down, and he was wearing a tidy gray jacket, but his sharp gaze wasn't concealed at all. Why is Yondaime here—Ahh, no, Yondaime does know about Iharagi Junko. He must have came to observe the shop and get information. When Yondaime walked closer, my eyes fell to the asphalt under my feet as I picked up the bicycle.

I didn't raise my head. I could only count his footsteps. After all, I had gotten separated from him like that, so I didn't know what face I should make. I didn't have the energy to walk away, either.

When Yondaime passed by my side, my whole body stiffened and I held my breath. When the footsteps disappeared behind me, I finally stomped on the asphalt as if trying to kick it away, and stepped on the pedals. The cold wind cut my ears and pierced the gap between my scarf and my head.

We didn't say anything to each other and our eyes didn't meet. That was a given because I said he had turned into my enemy, but my heart still ached as if it was about to get twisted off.

Needless to say, the one who had broken things to that extent had been me.

“The identities of the three mahjong bears has been found out. Tetsu and the others went to confirm that just now.”

When I showed up at the Detective Agency, Alice said that. I was surprised and climbed up the bed with my coat and my scarf still on. Three monitors displayed a photograph and a profile each. They were indeed the three young men I had suspected and kept an eye on.

“So you found them.”

Didn't Alice instruct the NEET Detective Squad to focus on the paid dating incident and give up on chasing after the mahjong bears? How did she find them?

“I'm afraid I wasn't the one who found them.” Alice shrugged. “Yondaime sent me an email.”

I was dumbfounded.

“W...Why?”

Weren't we enemies now?

“Even if Hinamura Souichirou is your enemy, if we progressed with our investigation based on this information, Hirasaka-gumi could approach Shushuri once again.”

I looked up at the roof and sighed.

“You must be thinking *'So am I the only one opening wounds everywhere because of my insignificant stubbornness?'*, right?”

“...Don't go assuming what other people are thinking on your own....” You're basically right, though.

Alice pursed her lips and continued:

“But, you're not the only stubborn one. I am your employer, and an enemy of yours is an enemy of mine. Of course, I can no longer obtain all of Yondaime's information, and I can't ask him to fix my stuffed toys anymore, either.”

“Why--”

I swallowed my words. I felt a creaky pain on my throat. This was the consequence of our decision. Alice left the decision to me, and I chose to oppose Yondaime. I severed the mutual trust and affection between Yondaime and Alice with my own hands.

Stop, don't think about that, I told myself. I was aware of the

magnitude of the wounds, but I had the feeling that the blood flowing from them was increasing. I bit my lips and swallowed my iron-flavored saliva, then I slowly opened my mouth and began my report as an assistant detective:

“I met with Iharagi Junko. She's quite suspicious.”

Alice nodded, hiding her loneliness behind her long eyelashes.

“Well done. Speak.”

I described in detail what happened at Angel Flowers' Workshop. About how Iharagi Junko said she knew Hakamizaka Shirou and Ayaka and didn't deny it, and how she said she had told everything to the police and even let them inspect her shop and her greenhouse. And then her son had revealed that an acquaintance of Hakamizaka Shirou had come before.

“I see... Then we can focus on various questions, if she's Shushuri.”

Alice stared at the empty Dr Pepper can in her hand.

“But there's still not enough information. If Iharagi Junko orders her gardening fertilizers online, we could find out her background right away, but it would be good to know what kind of fertilizers Hakamizaka used...”

She hesitated, and I also lowered my gaze to the sheets. Ayaka would know about that. More precisely, Ayaka before leaping from the rooftop would know. As of yet, that information was buried somewhere among Ayaka's memories, and maybe they could be dug up. But we fought with Yondaime to not let him do that.

The phone rang. Alice bent her body and pushed the talk button, switching to hands-free.

′The three mahjong bears are missing.′

Tetsu-senpai's voice resounded inside the bedroom.

“Missing? Since when?” Alice inquired in a tense voice.

Missing? Again?

′Dunno. Hiro is now looking for the last people who saw them. The three live alone, so no one noticed they were missing for a while.′

As soon as she finished talking with Tetsu-senpai, Alice called Major.

“Did any of the mahjong bears visit Flower Angels' Workshop?”

′Not presently. However, the surveillance started yesterday, so we can't know if they went there before.′

“Hmm. How many people are rotating? I want to calculate the labor costs.”

Since we couldn't ask Hirasaka-gumi now, Major's survival game partners had been asked to rotate in order to keep watch 24 hours a day. Of course, that should be quite expensive.

′Eight people. Is Tetsu-san's money enough?′

“That's my own problem. All of you continue keeping watch.”

Alice took a deep breath and started her next can of Dr Pepper.

First the survivor of the Fix's manufacturing group, Chigasawa Teruhiko, and now the three people who used Fix to earn money on the mahjong parlors, had disappeared. Where did they all vanish to? And where is all the money they gathered?

“Do we know how those three are connected to Hakamizaka?”

Alice shook her head.

“Not yet. We don't know the link between Oshima and Hakamizaka either. Had they contacted each other online to get the drugs I could investigate everything, but since the people who took Angel Fix had that surreal network...”

I had come in contact with that surrealism once for just a moment, so I understood the meaning of Alice's words. Those red angels' pills

enhanced your senses and let you experience great happiness, giving you a dreadful mental sharpness. In the middle of this city's torrent of lights and noises, one could discern Bob Dylan's song coming from a portable music player, finding the dealers. There was no need to use the internet or cellphones.

Maybe Hakamizaka Shirou told those people something when they met, a way to meet Shushuri? And then after a year they had to visit her, gather money and set off on a trip?

“Why now? What made them do it?”

Alice muttered. I looked into her eyes, then I picked up the empty cans and got up. As I had been her assistant for some time now, I knew that once she sinks in the swamp of her thoughts, she won't come to the surface for a while.

When I was throwing the empty cans into the dumpster in front of the kitchen's door I heard a voice saying “Fujishima-kun!” When I raised my head, Ayaka approached the back alley with long steps. She had just arrived, judging by the coat she was wearing over her uniform.

“I went to Yondaime's place!” Ayaka said, raising her eyebrows, and I was taken aback.

“Eh- w-why-!?”

“Because you won't tell me anything, Fujishima-kun.”

Ayaka pushed both her gloved hands against my chest.

“Yondaime wasn't there, but the men from the gang told me lots of things!”

My head started to hurt. Why did she do that? I took back the sake ritual just so Ayaka wouldn't be involved with Hirasaka-gumi or the investigation...

“I couldn't understand most of what they said, but I understood

when they said Fujishima-kun severed his bonds with Yondaime. Hey, is that true?”

Ayaka looked like she was about to cry. I gave up on trying to think, so I forced a smile.

“No, you see, that's... That brotherhood sake ritual was just a game of make-believe. Kinda like turf wars between delinquents and all that. You shouldn't worry about that, Ayaka.”

“I *am* worried! I can easily tell you're lying, Fujishima-kun. He was an important older brother to you, wasn't he? I can't just ignore that gloomy face of yours. Hey, is it my fault? B-because I told you that Yondaime had interrogated me...?”

“It's not that!”

I suddenly pushed back Ayaka's shoulders. The empty cans at my feet rolled, making a metallic sound.

“It's not your fault, Ayaka. It's something I decided on my own. It has nothing to do with you.”

Being unable to explain anything felt irritating. Because my wish was that she didn't know anything, and she didn't remember anything.

The only thing I could do was running away. I hopped on my bicycle and left the back alley.

“Fujishima-kun!”

Ayaka's serious voice mangled my back, and my feet pedaled faster.

What am I doing? Seriously, what am I doing? Just a stubborn bluff after another. Would it have been better if I didn't do anything from the start? I don't know.

My head was a complete mess.

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I skipped school the next day. I did it because I didn't want to meet Ayaka, but I lied to myself with the excuse of having to focus on my assistant detective work. I slept until the afternoon. I'm the lowest.

'You're already becoming a NEET at full speed. How about you proudly drop out of school already? It would be a magnificent celebration.'

Those were the cold words Alice told me when I called her.

"I don't want to become a laughingstock, so please stop... More importantly, did you find the place?"

'Yes. It's surprisingly near. I'll send you the address by email.'

The place Alice had asked me to investigate was the elementary school that Iharagi Junko's son attended. I was indeed surprised when I read the mail. It was really near the Detective Agency.

I left home and rode my bicycle. The sun was already setting, making me feel apologetic towards society. The sky was clear, but the wind was colder than the former day.

When I parked my bicycle next to a park, I was surprised by the crowd gathered there. That place that had been the stage where we spent most of our December didn't seem like a homeless park anymore. No, there are no homeless people anymore. I didn't see any construction vehicles either, and the guard fences had been removed. Now there were only young couples and parents with their kids in sight. Cheerful laughter came from the grass slopes, while sounds of skateboards sliding on the concrete and a soccer team playing were also heard.

I see, today's the inauguration, I realized.

This public park was now called *Hercules Sports Park*, and it was an admission-payed athletic institution. Neither the smell of blood nor the darkness of the groves that kept people away were there anymore. It didn't seem like a weekday with all the congestion.

Everything changes, I thought, flooded with a meaningless sentimentalism. There's nothing that stays still forever. Nothing ever vanishes. Things simply get washed away, moving from place to place.

Even a few broadcasting vehicles from TV stations stopped, so it didn't seem like there was a place to park on the street. I turned my back to the park, crossed the road, and I parked my bicycle under the shade of a small building.

The elementary school was just ahead. The school building could be seen beyond a tall fence, a grove of trees, and the courtyard. It was really big and near the station, so it was probably a private institution.

I arrived in time for the end of the class of course, but I stood there looking at the children on the school gates. About half of them weren't carrying backpacks but bags such as the ones that middle school students use. A sign of the times, it seems.... No, this is not the time to be admiring that, what should I do now? How will I find Tomoki-kun, and what should I say? This is an elementary school, so if I'm to careless, I could end up being labeled as a suspicious person. My usual ineptitude made me feel down. A bus approached the school gates and I also saw some people that looked like part of the school staff, so I ran away along the fence.

But before I reached the corner of the school, I stopped on my tracks, dumbfounded.

Beyond the fence, there were many flowerbeds with thickly grown, tall sunflower-like plants. On that corner, there was a small silhouette squatting with a shovel in his hands. When I got closer to see him better, the fence creaked, so the silhouette raised his head and turned around.

“Ah.”

The boy opened his eyes and mouth in perfect circles—he was without a doubt Tomoki-kun.

“...You're the person from yesterday!” Tomoki-kun said, pointing at

me.

I quickly put my finger to my lips, going “shhh”, but he left the shovel, the watering can and the toolbox behind and rushed up.

“Are you Shirou-san's friend?” Tomoki-kun asked, clinging to the wire mesh. I was about to say “no”, but then I realized it would be a good excuse to talk to him, so I nodded.

“So, are you an angel florist?”

I didn't really understand, but I nodded again.

“Then I'll let you in!”

Tomoki-kun quickly opened a small back gate on the left. I wanted to say “No, wait a second”. I was thankful for the welcoming mood, but no excuse would suffice if I was caught inside the school territory.

However, before I realized, I was entering anyway. This isn't the time to be whining, I won't have many opportunities as this one. I have to take the risk. As soon as I hear what I need, I'll run away.

“Hey, Tomoki-kun.”

“Yes?” The boy's sweetness was just like his mother's, and it made my heart hurt a little.

“If a teacher or someone like that sees us, uhm, could you tell them that your mom asked me to deliver something and help you out a little?”

“You're going to help out!?” Tomoki-kun's eyes sparkled. Hey, don't stray off from the subject. Well, it can't be helped, he's just a seven-year-old boy.

I helped out with weeding, watering and pruning. I had a little knowledge about it, after all. I had no other choice either, since I had to get along with him to get the information. Of course, my attention was mainly focused on checking the surroundings in case someone was watching us, and because of that I dropped the shovel

onto my tiptoes several times. Even so, Tomoki-kun complimented me with a “you're so skillful!” I didn't understand what I was doing anymore.

“Tomoki-kun, you're really skillful too, and your tools are really good.”

The way he cut the tip of the nutrient ampoule reminded me of Ayaka's technique.

“Tomo wants to become an angel florist like mama and Shirou-san.” Tomoki-kun smiled, holding the shovel full of soil in his hand.

“Hey, uhm, what's an angel florist?”

“Someone like mama and Shirou-san.”

I put a hand on my chest and took a deep breath. It can't be helped, he's just a seven-year-old boy.

“That's why mama is teaching me. The teacher praised me a lot for how I took care of the flowers!”

I see. I took an extensive view of the garden again. There were several warm-retaining sheets on the soil, and tall planters were put together. There was also a big metal latticed drainage. The plants were really well looked after. Even though he was only a second year, he was the son of an horticulturist, after all. Thanks to that, I had an excuse to talk to him.

“Shirou-san said he had flowerbeds way way bigger than the ones at home and at school. He promised he'd show me, but he hasn't come here at all lately.”

“Uhm, did he use to come often?”

“From time to time, when Tomo was in first grade.”

In other words, when he was still alive.

I gulped, and discreetly tried to get to the core of the subject.

“...And what about Shirou-san's friends? Have they been coming lately?”

“Yup.” Tomoki-kun nodded, gently filling up the roots of the flowers with mulch. “Various people came to play here. Teruhiko-san and the others played a lot with Tomo.”

Teruhiko. Chigasawa Teruhiko?

This—There's no doubt about it anymore, isn't it?

Fragments of uneasiness started growing inside me like small fireworks. What is this? I had the feeling that everything is going a little too smoothly. Am I thinking too much?

“Do you know why those people came?”

“Uhmm?”

Tomoki-kun spun the shovel in his hand, staring into thin air while pondering.

“...Will you keep it a secret from mama?”

“Eh?”

“Mama scolded me a lot after that.”

Ah, yesterday? When I went to ask if she knew Hakamizaka, Tomoki-kun talked too much to me, and Iharagi Junko turned pale and made him shut up.

“It's okay. I definitely won't tell your mom.”

I felt gloomy when I promised him that. It made me feel guilty having all the confidence of this elementary schooler who still didn't know distrust. Also, if his mother turned out to be a criminal, there was a possibility that this boy was in danger.

However, I crushed those feelings, waiting for Tomoki-kun's next words. Before long, he raised his gaze and opened his mouth:

“They all brought a lot of money. You see, the flowers need a medicine. It's very expensive. Mama told me not to say anything no matter what--”

I stood up. Tomoki-kun stopped talking and raised his head blankly. There's no doubt anymore. Iharagi Junko must be Shushuri. But the uneasy feeling lingered on my tongue. Is everything really that obvious? Is there a trap somewhere?

At that moment, I saw two or three silhouettes beyond the campus, pointing this way. Uh-oh, they must be teachers or people from the school. And they're approaching really quickly.

“Thank you, Tomoki-kun, bye.” I said, turning on my heels to the back gate.

“You're leaving already-?” Tomoki-kun grabbed the hem of my duffle coat. “But everyone stayed longer...”

“I have an urgent task, see you later.”

I gently stroked Tomoki-kun's head and rushed out the back door.

I bumped into Tetsu-senpai running down the emergency stairs in front of the ramen shop's kitchen door. He looked like he was in a real hurry, and we almost collided.

“Wh—What's wrong?”

“Oshima has disappeared.”

I widened my eyes. That Oshima? The head of the paid dating group?

“Disappeared? Didn't Yondaime have him captive?”

“No, he was transferred to the general hospital.” True, they did said that before. “He regained consciousness and fled from the ward. I'm going to look for him with Hiro. Without Hirasaka-gumi I don't

even know where should we start looking for him though... Ask Alice for the details."

Tetsu-senpai talked fast and ran away. I rushed up the emergency stairs and entered the Agency. Alice was talking on the phone.

"...Yes, does everyone have Oshima's pictures?"

'If we set up two people 24 hours a day the labor costs will increase, is that okay?'

Major's answering voice was heard. I silently listened to their conversation in front of the bed. They were probably talking about emphasizing the surveillance system around Angel Flowers' Workshop in case they saw the missing Oshima around.

"I don't mind, he should appear today or tomorrow."

'What about Oshima's house?'

"Hirasaka-gumi is there. We don't have spare power to go there. You just fully concentrate on the Iharagi residence, Hirasaka-gumi will stake out there soon, so if Oshima appears, we absolutely need to be the ones who make the first move."

'Roger that. By the way, Iharagi Junko did some slightly suspicious actions.'

I held my breath, taken aback, and knelt on the bed, leaning forward, closer to the speaker.

'Since yesterday, she let her employees handle everything and didn't show up at the shop. Sounds of a cabinet being opened and closed and some luggage being raised and lowered were heard for some reason.'

"Hm." Alice held her chin with her hand.

Iharagi Junko has been moving since yesterday—After I interrogated her and Tomoki-kun revealed that they knew Hakamizaka. Was she destroying some evidence?

“Understood. Anyway, if something happens contact me again.”

Alice hung up. As soon as she turned around, I opened my mouth impatiently:

“I talked with Iharagi Junko's son.”

When I reported everything I heard from Tomoki-kun, deep wrinkles appeared between Alice's brows, and she stared at the pit of my stomach. It was an unusual expression for her.

“There's just something that doesn't fit... You are thinking the same, aren't you?”

“...Eh? Ah, y-yeah.”

“I am a detective who uses words as a blade so I don't want to say this, but something's vague.”

“Yeah...”

So Alice is also feeling this uneasiness? That made me feel a little relieved.

“However, now's the time to find the missing pieces. People are disappearing in succession too quickly. Human beings don't simply vanish into thin air that easily. Where could they be?”

“Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san said they were going to look for them, but where are they going to search? If also help out--”

Alice shook her head.

“There is no need for you to go. Iharagi Junko has an office in Aoyama and a villa in Tochigi, so Tetsu and Hiro are going there. If Iharagi Junko is Shushuri, and her followers are gathering under her wings, there must be a place to shelter them. Of course, it's possible that said place isn't one of her properties, but since we don't have other places to look for them, we have no choice but to run around randomly.”

“nnh.... I see.”

At these times we would normally rely on Yondaime's infiltration tactics to push through, since his influence for this kind of practical things is huge.

“And that sheltering place might not be necessary in the first place.”

Alice muttered with her face bathed in the dim light of the monitor.

“...eh?”

“There is also a big possibility that there is a place to hide corpses.”

I heavily gulped down, remembering the conclusion of the incident a year ago. All members of Angel Fix's manufacturing/selling group overdosed on the drug, and five out of the seven people died. The sixth person went missing this winter, and the seventh person was still dyed in despair, secluded in his room. Everyone was charmed by the hands of the angels, unable to think about anything but running away from this world.

For that reason, perhaps the missing people we're looking for are long dead already. That possibility has to be taken into consideration.

But they shouldn't just be dead. Oshima said he needed money to Shushuri. If he just wanted to die, he could just wait in his bed. Did they all disappear because they went to see Shushuri? Did they go to spend their last moments under Shushuri's wings? What was Iharagi Junko doing on the second floor, without showing up at the shop? Was she disposing of the corpses?

“Narumi. This is your duty.”

“Eh-? Ah-” Alice suddenly spoke to me, so I raised my head.

“You'll have to face those fools.”

With a shocked face, Alice pointed at one of the monitors of the security cameras; two huge silhouettes could be seen entering Hanamaru. I only saw their backs for a second, but I instantly knew who they were. Pole and Rocky. I ran to the door of the Agency in confusion.

When I went down the emergency stairs and entered the shop, Pole and Rocky were sitting in front of the counter, while Ayaka was holding a first-aid kit, disinfecting the wounds on their faces. They both looked weird, with their eyes and cheeks red and swollen.

“You're scaring everyone walking on the streets looking like this!” Ayaka was sticking adhesive plasters on their faces while scolding them.

“So sorry, Ayaka-neesan.” “So sorry.”

I stood stock still under the awning, looking at the mayhem. What on earth happened to those two? And since when do they refer to Ayaka as nee-san? By the way, it will be awkward if Ayaka sees me here even though I skipped school... All those thoughts kept swirling in my mind, making dizzy, and I felt like I was going to collapse.

Ayaka looked at me for a second, but then she put a sullen face and continued healing those two.

“What are you doing, Narumi?” Min-san said behind the counter, stirring the contents of a stock pot. “Don't just stand on the entrance, the shop is going to open soon and you're in the way. If you're that free, then take those two idiots somewhere else. Those unsightly potato-looking faces will make the customers run away.”

“Aah.... Erm...”

I looked at Pole and Rocky in turn and finally managed to squeeze my voice out.

“Wh-what's with those injuries?”

“Yes sir! Sou-san beat us up!” “We asked him to make up with Aniki and he rashed!”

“*Raged.*” Ayaka retorted before I could and then turned her face to look at me. “Fujishima-kun, sit down too, come on.”

I was taken aback and became flustered.

“E-eehm... W-why?”

“Because I need to scold you a lot, Fujishima-kun! First of all, you skipped school today!”

Ayaka's angry look made me straighten my posture on the stool.

“Don't you want to graduate together with me? Do you want to become a NEET that badly?”

“No, it's not that, but....”

“Explaining so many things to me would have been bothersome so you took the day off, right?”

Exactly. Pole and Rocky weren't being scolded, but they fixed their postures just like me and hung their heads. The only one who could save me now was Min-san. She should say something like 'Stop making a fuss inside the shop and leave!'

“Oi, Ayaka, I'll give you five more minutes to finish.”

“Okay, thank you, Min-san.”

Why are you so half-assedly sweet to Ayaka!?

“Listen, Fujishima-kun.”

Ayaka suddenly lowered her voice.

“It's my fault that you quarreled with Yondaime, isn't it? Even if you tell me it isn't I know you're lying, because,you know, you had the same face when you told me you were going to box with Tetsu-senpai, Fujishima-kun.”

I finally understood. Even if I'm good at deceiving people, I'm really bad at lying. In other words, I can distort the truth with fabrications and make people believe that, but I just can't put a simple mask on the reality. For that reason, I don't believe in lying just to cover the truth.

I myself, believe, and hope, that the future is connected to the here

and now. That's probably what Alice calls the *story*. If there's no story, it's just a lie, and is thus completely seen through.

“...Would you tell me the reason?”

I could only shake my head at Ayaka's words. I can't explain it. We're running around so that the case will end without having to explain it to you.

“...It's about the narcotics, isn't it? Supplies are circulating again, right?”

My whole body felt like it was going to melt as I looked downwards. Narcotics. I didn't want to hear that word from Ayaka's mouth. Why does she know? Did she remember just because she glanced at Hakamizaka and Chigasawa's photos that time? Or did Yondaime tell her that far? Or perhaps she got the information from the idiots from Hirasaka-gumi? Of course, no matter how much I beat people up or get beaten up myself, I can't change the fact that Ayaka *does* know something. I can only lock her up in a bird cage.

“Hey, Fujishima-kun. I'll be fine if I remember, you know? It's more painful for me to see you fighting with Yondaime.”

I felt like crying out. Why are you saying that? Just seeing Angel Fix's name causes you to panic and hyperventilate, don't you remember that? What point there is to my decision if Ayaka says that to me? Why did I break everything?

“Ayaka, time's up. You're wasting your breath.”

Min-san spoke with her usual cruel, cold kindness.

“It's just a quarrel between two stubborn brothers. Whatever you say won't change a thing.”

“We'll kneel down on the ground!”

“Aniki, please, go talk with Sou-san once more!”

“Oi, you huge idiots. Don't you understand anything? That's not the problem here. Can't you even tell that?”

I couldn't take it anymore, so I stepped down from the stool and left the shop. Ayaka's voice didn't chase after me either this time.

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Alice called me the next day during lunch break, telling me that Toshi-san had disappeared. Avoiding Ayaka's gaze in the corridor, I pressed the cellphone close to my ear.

“...Disappeared?”

’Toshi's father called Tetsu to ask him if he knew where Toshi was. It seems like he hasn't returned home since yesterday at noon. Do you have any idea? You talked to him a few times.’

My legs felt a little weak. Toshi-san too? Didn't he say he hadn't been called by Shushuri and didn't know where she was? Why did he disappear now?

“...What about Iharagi's house?”

’No movements worth mentioning.’

Noise filled the back of my skull. What is this? Where did they all go? Iharagi Junko is Shushuri, that woman is the angel that guided Hakamizaka and the others—Or isn't she? Is there something we're still overlooking?

“Anyway, I'm going there.”

I rushed down the stairs at the end of the corridor while putting my cellphone in my pocket.

I was too careless. I completely forgot about Toshi-san. Why did I ignore him when he was sunk to the neck in the quagmire?

I jumped onto my bike and kicked up the stand.

No, what could I have done? He wouldn't listen to a word of what I said. His body was an empty shell barely stained with the lingering scent of life, unable to think about anything else except the angel that abandoned him.

I arrived just at lunch time, so Hanamaru was packed. There were even tables outside the shop, with young salarymen all curled up in their coats slurping miso ramen. At that time, Min-san came outside and stared at me, so I turned my face away and took my bicycle to the back alley, going up the emergency stairs.

Alice looked at my face and asked, surprised:

“What about school? Are you going to be absent from the afternoon classes again?”

“W-well, that doesn't matter, right? More importantly, Toshi-san--”

Cold eyes looked at me from the bed.

“You're still a high school student, yet you have the biggest NEET soul out of everyone I know. It is strange. It's your double-edged weapon.”

“What are you saying at this time--”

“If you have a clear goal, your means to reach it become breathtakingly sharp, but you constantly lose sight of that goal.”

“I... Don't understand what you're saying.”

I actually did understand a little, because Alice's eyes also looked sad.

“I am the same, but...”

Her voice sounded frail, not much different than a sigh.

“With yesterday's daily allowance, the money I accepted from Tetsu was exhausted. I would end the request under normal circumstances, but my fingers are still trying to catch the darkness. It's like a bug wriggling inside my head. Just like you, I lost sight of

my goal... And I continue looking for the way."

In the form of the request, Alice wasn't moving for anyone's sake. The money from the client had been already spent, so there shouldn't be a reason to investigate anymore.

But Alice quietly shook her head.

"Let's push this NEET pride tall story aside and go back to talking about business. Tetsu went to the office in Aoyama, and Major is still staking out the Iharagi residence. Hiro found out that one of his acquaintances is a customer at Angel Flowers' Workshop so he's going to meet her. We can no longer select the methods, because Toshi left home yesterday at noon. His father saw him, so that much is certain. He's been missing for twenty-four hours."

Surrounded by the unnatural light of the monitors, Alice's face looked even more pale. Toshi-san might have gone to be taken by the angel again. Twenty-four hours. He might be dead already.

"But, why now? Remember your conversation with Toshi. Didn't he say he didn't know Shushuri's whereabouts?"

I nodded.

"How was he called then? Same with the others. Were they called? Did Iharagi Junko send some kind of sign?"

Alice kept returning to that question, but I had a hunch that that wasn't the main issue. As long as we didn't find that *key*, we'd still be misreading something—I had that feeling.

"I'll go to Toshi-san's house, if I check his room I might understand something."

"For what reason?" She muttered, with her eyes still sunken in the swamp of her thoughts.

"For what reason? Well..."

"No, I'm sorry. I was only asking myself. I don't understand. For whose sake are we investigating now? We even turned your brother

into our enemy. For Tetsu, who didn't even have the money? For Yondaime, who canceled his request? Or perhaps for Toshi, who never asked for help?"

Please, stop, I thought. Why hurt yourself again with your own words and actions? You'd be at ease if you just thought more simply. But I couldn't turn those thoughts into words, because I was also trapped in that foolish spiral, more or less. The thought of stopping was even more painful.

All the solutions were reduced into one. If she threw the Agency's signboard into the trash bin outside, she would stop being a detective and would become just a hikkikomori.

Hey, Alice, isn't that much more comfortable? The though just crossed my mind, but if the despondency is eating away her skin, I'll comply just like that. Maybe we should stop running around and sniffing around. There's no need to keep doing things no one wished to be done until we're detested. We could just let the truth rot under the mold of some grave.

But, at that time—

The door opened. The air-conditioned atmosphere surged. The world where Alice and I were helplessly imprisoned cracked. We raised our gazes at almost the same time, looking at the Agency's door. A small silhouette passed by the side of the refrigerator and stepped into the dim light of the bedroom. Short chestnut hair held in place with a small hair clip swayed in the wind of the conditioned air.

Ayaka.

She probably came directly from school, since she was still wearing a coat over her school clothes.

I was frozen and unable to say anything. She gazed at me, then her eyes turned to Alice. She pulled something from her pocket and threw it on Alice's lap.

"...What is this?"

“My salary from this month. I asked Min-san for an advanced payment.”

Still frozen, I stared at Ayaka's fingertips. Salary? Why—Why is Ayaka bringing money?

Alice spoke in a trembling voice.

“I will hear your request.”

“You know it already! It's the same as Tetsu-senpai, but since senpai didn't have enough money, I'll pay the rest for him.”

“Ayaka, why are you--”

My voice finally came out, but Ayaka interrupted:

“Don't ask me why, Fujishima-kun, don't you understand? This is *my case*, isn't it?”

Ayaka's words were like a serious hit somewhere inside me.

“This is not only senpai, Yondaime, or Fujishima-kun's case! Hey... I don't know how many secrets you've been keeping from me, but I know that much.”

It's true. This is Ayaka's case. A case that got Ayaka hurt, and it kept harming her inevitably.

That's why I hid it from you. Why can't you understand that?

Ayaka's gaze felt like a bullet of melting ice, shooting through my eyes.

“I—I took everything upon myself and jumped without saying anything to Fujishima-kun, right?”

Ayaka's voice made my ears buzz. I felt like I was being pulled back

to that freezing winter morning, remembering the blood spreading over the flowerbeds' soil.

But Ayaka's words continued, tying my consciousness to the reality.

“I won't do that again, because I already know. I know Fujishima-kun is here. Alice is here too, everyone's here, and little by little we can share it all together.”

I dug my fingernails on the sheets, enduring the heat flowing from the wounds of Ayaka's words.

“No matter how painful the things I remember might be, I'll be okay. But I definitely don't want to see Fujishima-kun being separated from anyone.”

I felt this was Ayaka's pain. At that moment, we were certainly sharing her pain. For that reason, I remembered the words she said to me way back then: Cry normally when you're sad, shout normally when you're angry, laugh normally when you're happy, speak your mind normally when you want something. If we're unable to do that, then there's absolutely no point to your wounds.

I tried to climb down the bed, but my knees were only shaking. I felt like all the bones in my body were in the wrong place, unable to put themselves in place. I couldn't move one finger.

At that moment, I heard noisy footsteps of several people outside. Alice let out a little gasp, and her black hair swayed. The door was then pushed open with worrying strength, and the footsteps rushed over.

“Sorry for intruding!” “Ane-san, sorry for intruding!”

The group of muscular men who were crowded together like a mountain of trash bags about to collapse were Hirasaka-gumi's members. I gripped the sheets with my hands behind my back, trying with all my might not to faint, but my voice wouldn't come out either. Why are you guys here, and in such a great number? Aren't you all the members of the gang? You won't be able to get into the bedroom—Hey, stop, you're going to break the door frame.

“What are you all doing!? A wild gorilla has better manners than you!”

Led by Pole and Rocky, the men in black shirts knelt on the ground in a row. The men behind were forced out to the corridor and the stairs. Ayaka was so frightened that she climbed up the bed.

“Why are you all here? You are my enemies.”

“There's no way we're ane-san's enemies!” “Hey, shut up!” “Don't cry!”

Making the guys behind him quiet down, Rocky came a few centimeters closer.

“We're here under Sou-san's orders.”

“Yondaime's?” My voice suddenly came out in the form of that question.

“Yes sir, we heard Toshi was missing! But since he won't ask Ane-san for information, he told us to rush out and ask around!”

“He told us to split up in any ways or beat up whoever was necessary to get the information!”

With a shocked face, Alice looked up at the ceiling. I felt something hot overflowing, even in the middle of the cold. By my side, Ayaka fixed her gaze on my face.

“Narumi.”

I heard the voice of the detective behind my back.

“I do not wish to command these regressed troglodytes. You're not going to say that you don't know what you have to do if your employer doesn't tell you at this point, are you?”

I wasn't sure if I should nod or not. Should I stand up, with my hands and feet only, with this drooped body and the few strength it has left only?

But then, I noticed Ayaka's hand on the back of mine.

It's okay if it's not only my own strength.

I placed my hand on Ayaka's shoulder and slowly raised my body, climbing down from the bed and standing on the chilly floor. I counted the black shirts and opened my mouth:

“....Please split into three groups. Five of you will contact Major for the surveillance rotation.”

“Yes sir!” “We shall now hone our manly aura!”

“Six of you will be on standby at the gang's office.”

“Yes sir!” “We will wait for orders with all of our fighting spirit!”

“And four of you will drive near Toshi-san's house and investigate the places where he could have spent his money, like convenience stores and all that. I'm going too, and--”

I immediately look at the chestnut-colored hair.

“--Ayaka is coming along too.”

“Yes sir!” “Yes sir.” “We shall now hone our manly aura!”

With the throaty voices of the giants intermingling, I pressed my small fists on my legs until the 'yes sirs' became faintly audible.

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I looked at Ayaka standing behind me. Her father was frozen with his jaw agape.

“Excuse us.”

I bowed my head and took off my shoes, walking into the apartment. When I looked behind me, the atmosphere between

father and child was as stiff as an rolled up aluminum foil being extended. Ayaka bowed her head with upturned eyes, and his father averted his gaze and pointed at the corridor with his chin. The distant formalities were almost repulsive, matching the circumstances.

It took around 20 minutes by car to reach the apartment in Sedagaya from the Detective Agency. Ayaka didn't have enough time to prepare herself psychologically.

Ayaka actually didn't remember her father. Was it because he was a memory linked to Toshi-san? Or perhaps her father was someone she didn't want to remember? I don't know if something happened between this father and his children, nor the reason behind their parents' divorce, nor what this father does during the day, but now is not the time to worry about that.

“Ayaka, come on.” I urged, opening the door at the end of the narrow corridor.

I became petrified when I looked inside the room. The curtains were closed, so it was pitch dark even in the middle of the day. The TV was still on, faintly illuminating the clothes and convenience store bags on the floor. Also, some black figures were covering the desk, the wooden floor and the white wallpapers. When I leaned over to look more closely, I noticed they were wings. Each one of they were drawn with oil-based markers. I pushed Ayaka back to the corridor and closed the door.

“...What's wrong?” Ayaka muttered.

I bit my lip and shook my head. Ayaka forgor about all this because it's an extremely deep wound. The fact that she unconsciously grew the raw materials for the narcotics. The fact that Hakamizaka forced her to take the drug. And the most important thing--the hallucinations caused by the Angel Fix, and the feeling of emptiness that followed.

If she sees this room full of insane drawings of angel wings, she might remember everything.

No, but--

We decided to share it. If I keep this door shut, why did I bring her along? I opened the door and Ayaka in. As soon as she entered, she was also unable to move.

“...Do you recognize... those marks?” I inquired behind her back. Ayaka moved her head slightly. I wasn't too sure is she was shaking her head or nodding.

“...I might have seen them, but....”

“It's okay if you just don't remember. Let's search inside.”

I pushed Ayaka into the room and entered.

“I wonder if he left a note or something...”

Ayaka squatted down and started looking inside the trash bin. I opened the notebook computer. As it was apparently on stand-by mode, the web browser was displayed on the screen immediately. I checked the history. I barely saw anything but anonymous boards and news blogs. Did he see something on the internet that made him run away? Did Toshi-san find Shushuri's guidance somewhere in the wide sea of the web? First of all, I'll send an email to Alice with the history. It will be faster to separate all this information with her computers, as it's not something you can just find manually.

The TV. Not all the floor was covered with the drawings of the wings, there was a circular space in front of the TV without them. All the marks spread radially around that space. In other words, he started drawing them while sitting in front of the TV.

The TV was still on in the NHK News channel. I checked the hard disk of the DVD recorder. Below a big late night anime lineup, there was a recording of the NHK news. When I played it, the news *’...crowded with parents taking their children...’* started abruptly. Did he record something as soon as he saw it? If so, why this news?

’Climbing walls and skateboarding floors has been installed in this park, which is now admission-payed—’

These were news I was quite familiar with. A report on the inauguration of Hercules Sports Park. Why did Toshi-san record this? Soon after that, the image on the upper left of the announcer was enlarged, showing lots of parents and children in the park. There were also interviews to the people there, and since it was NHK's territory, there was even footage filmed from above with a helicopter. When they returned to the studio, the announcer was moving to the next news, I heard Ayaka's voice close to my ears.

“Fujishima-kun! Rewind that!”

Ayaka brought her face closer to the LCD screen as she said that. Bewildered, I operated the remote control to do as she said.

’...crowded with parents taking their children...’

The news started over again. Just when the camera changed to the footage filmed from above, Ayaka hit the pause button from the remote control in my hand.

“Wh....What's the matter?” I timidly asked, looking from the side at Ayaka's face still closely fixed on the TV.

“I know those.”

“...Eh?”

“I know those. I've seen them before. No, not only that.”

Ayaka muttered, pointing at the lower right of the screen. At that moment, everything pieced together inside my head. The TV. The guiding voice of the angel came from the TV. That's why we couldn't follow those traces. That's why it was happening after a year. That homeless park--Since November of last year the reparation works started, the people opposing them, and a murder case were all repeatedly discussed topics that appeared several times on the news. That's the reason Shushuri's followers opened their eyes this winter. Chigasawa Teruhiko, the guys who invaded the mahjong parlors, Oshima and Toshi-san... They all saw these news and heard Shushuri's voice, telling them—

I am here.

I stood up and grabbed Ayaka's arm.

“Let's hurry. I know Toshi-san's whereabouts.”

I rushed out the entrance and called Alice.

“Iharagi Junko might be in a hurry, tell Hiro-san to go there immediately please! I'll also go back there right now!”

′Did you find anything out?′

“I understood everything.”

Maybe it's already too late, I thought as I gulped down. I jumped into Hirasaka-gumi's van that was waiting in front of the apartment and closed the door.

“—Shushuri isn't Iharagi Junko.”

Just when Rocky stopped the vehicle on the road along the fence of the elementary school, the bell rang.

“I'll go alone first.”

Saying that, I halted the black shirted men and got off from the passenger's seat, but Ayaka came along too. Well, it can't be helped. I walked closer to the back door, and beyond the fence, I saw a small silhouette on his back, surrounded by flowerbeds. A great number of flowerpots still not budding were alligned on the soil under the sunlight.

“...Tomoki-kun.”

I called him with my hands on the fence. Ayaka also clung to the fence, staring at the planters inside the flowerbeds.

Tomoki-kun turned around in a flash and stood up with a broad smile, rushing over my way. Something inside me dried and cracked, about to break.

Is this the conclusion? Is this the end of the nightmare?

“You came!” Tomoki-kun said as if he was trying to cling to me through the fence.

My words were stabbed by that innocent smile.

“You were Shushuri, right?”

Tomoki-kun made a puzzled face and tilted his head slightly.

“...Shirou-san also said that. Shushuri.”

My breath felt like it was mixed with thousands of invisible nails. I gulped over and over again, trying to wash away the feeling of discomfort, but I wasn't successful.

“....I know these, Fujishima-kun.”

Ayaka muttered as in a trance, clinging to the fence.

“I know these. I was taught that they're planted concentrically, and they're surrounded with tall creeper plants.”

I didn't ask who taught her that. I couldn't ask. Even if Ayaka is remembering. Even if she's overcoming it by my side.

I stared at those flowerbeds with extending greenery that had called the junkies together. Whenever the news filmed the homeless park with aerial cameras, this school would appear on the background, and the angel's voice would spread through the public radio waves, calling them.

The unique narcotic plant was concealed by other plants surrounding it, but if they saw it from above, they would recognize it, even if the flowers weren't blooming this winter.

“Oneesan, do you grow poppy flowers too? Are you Shirou-san's friend?”

Ayaka leaned over in front of Tomoki-kun's eyes. Both were in front of each other with their hands on the fence.

“Yes, I grew them. I grew them just like those.”

“Really!? Hey, did yours bloom?”

Ayaka shook her head with empty eyes.

“Tomo's flowers only bloomed once, but since I wanted to show them to Shirou-san again, I studied a lot, a lot, a lot!”

Tomoki-kun's voice was lively, cruelly transparent.

“But since then, Tomo's flowers haven't bloomed at all. Because of that, when Teruhiko-san told me about those fertilizers and medicines, everyone brought a lot of money, so they'll bloom really soon.”

How ironic, I thought as I stared at the two. Ayaka and the angel were just separated by a thin web of synthetic fiber.

I balled my hands into fists and rubbed them against my thighs, brushing off my feelings.

“Tomoki-kun, did Shirou-san's friends come yesterday too?”

He nodded.

“Where are they?”

“They're down there, waiting together, because the flowers will bloom soon.”

He pointed at the big metallic latticed drainage. *Aah, I see*, I thought with a lingering feeling of emptiness. Underground, huh. Well, it's winter. If it was summer, they would have been discovered really quickly by the smell. When I turned my head to Hirasaka-gumi's van and gave instructions with my hand, the men in black shirts started getting out. They rudely opened the back gate at the side and broke into the garden.

“Ayaka, we might have to call the police, so go back to Hanamaru.”

I also entered the campus as I said that. Ayaka shook her head and followed me. She wanted to see with her own eyes... Isn't that stupid? Haven't you forgotten about Toshi-san? That's what I thought, but I didn't have the energy to tell her.

Rocky tore off the metallic drainage from the ground. There wasn't a shallow U-shaped gutter there, but a thick drainage channel where a person could walk around while standing.

One of the gang members illuminated the inside with a flashlight. Further inside there was a spacious basement basement-like room surrounded by concrete. It was probably the place were all the storm sewers came together. I snatched the flashlight out of the gang member's hand, and I pushed Rocky's big body aside and bent my body to see without obstruction.

The light of the flashlight illuminated some kind of figure on the basement's wall. People. They were all collapsed, leaning close to the wall with their legs sprawled. A chill and a feeling of repugnance crept up my skin. At that time, I cursed my own eyesight. Red grains were spread on the concrete floor at their feet.

Even so, my legs kept moving unsteadily, drawn in by the darkness and the smell of death. At that time, someone forcefully caught hold oh my shoulders.

“Move.”

“Sou-san!?” “S-sou-san, why?”

When I turned around, the gaze of a wolf pierced my cheeks. Yondaime. My throat cramped because of the shock. Why is Yondaime here? None of the information should have leaked to him.

“This ain't a place you should freely step into. Back off.”

“Wh-... Why... are you here?”

“Iharagi Junko turned the gas taps in her house. Had I arrived an

hour later, she'd be dead. You're always so easygoing. Out of my way."

"I'm—...ugh-"

Yondaime's fist thrust into my stomach, and the burning pain made me tumble on my back on the wet concrete.

"Aniki!" Rocky descended to the drainage. Unable to breath, I rubbed my back in agony against the concrete, and Yondaime poured his cold words on me.

"You severed your connections with me, so I'll say it frankly: Stay away from the corpses."

Yondaime instructed Rocky to drag me out, and soon I was back under the sun. I tumbled on the ground, feeling exhausted and sick on my stomach, and only saw how Yondaime and the black shirts dragged Toshi-san out of the drainage.

"And the others?" "They're all dead." "Bring a water hose and let him vomit everything, oi, Toshi, don't sleep!"

I absent-mindedly heard his voice far away. Then I heard the sirens, and the footsteps rushing over. My eyes met with Toshi-san's, who had the hose up his throat, his hair and clothes drenched in water, and was covered in vomit.

His cracked lips moved just a little, but I still understood what he was saying: *'Why did you save me?'*

I didn't save you was my voiceless answer. After that, I sidled up on my knees.

"Aniki, the cops are coming so please run away! Ayaka-neesan, you too!"

I interrupted Rocky's words with my hand and edged my face closer to Toshi-san's. Toshi-san spat out the hose and said something while spilling drool. *'God dammit, don't fuck with me, why, why'*—Probably that kind of ill words. His voice wouldn't come out, but he scratched my skin, and his frail fist hit my chest, one, twice, and

once again.

I didn't come to save you, I repeated voicelessly. I only came to retrieve something I had forgotten. Since I hit you that time, I only came so you could hit me. I couldn't quite tell apart the tears from the vomit on his face.

The strength of the hits on my chest weakened. His elbows trembled. Does it hurt? When you hit someone, you feel pain too— That's what it means to be alive.

But those fists lost their strength and fell onto Toshi-san's own chest. He averted his face and started sobbing this time.

I didn't know since when, but Ayaka was leaning over by my side.

“...I'm glad.”, she muttered.

There was no other words after that. We just stood there, silently close to each other, staring at what we had forgotten during that winter.

We slowly caught on to the noisy sounds of the sirens.

Chapter 5

Miracles can easily happen anytime, I thought when I was handed the results of the exams in late February, avoiding repeating the year.

“That wasn't a miracle, it was because you diligently studied with me!” Ayaka said in a huff.

It's true that I studied a lot during the two weeks I was suspended from school. I had free time, so I kept going to Hanamaru since morning, and since Ayaka had been suspended too, we piled up textbooks, notebooks and textbook guides on the wooden table in front of the kitchen's door, and started our study meetings that lasted for the whole fourteen days.

“But with this we're both third years, I'm so glad! Now we can relax.” Ayaka smiled broadly.

“Relax? We still have a whole year left. I don't know if my grades will be good enough.”

“It's okay!” Ayaka patted my back. “If you drop out of school during March of next year, it will be almost the same as graduating with me, right?”

“No it won't!”

“But we're both in the same class, do you think we won't be able to graduate together? If you think about it, it's not like I require you to graduate, Fujishima-kun.”

“What?”

“Because, you see, with your talents you won't need to enter the university. You can become a swindler, a yakuza, a public entertainer...”

The way you're saying it sounds more like I don't have any talent at all.

“We will have a special celebration in March, I'm looking forward to that!”

Special celebration? What on earth is that?

Ever since that incident, Ayaka had been really cheerful and looked like she was having fun everyday, so I didn't ask her anything in particular.

*

The reason why Ayaka and I were suspended from school was, of course, the Angel Fix case. The eight people we had investigated for offering money to Shushuri were found dead, rotting underground. The uproar that such a shocking incident caused didn't settle down for a month, so the school decided to suspend us to have a cooling-off period. A warm-hearted punishment. The police gave us a sound scolding. When the patrol cars came we were both at the scene, so obviously Hirasaka-gumi couldn't cover for us like they always did.

I don't really know what became of the Iharagi family. The mother, Iharagi Junko, attempted suicide in her kitchen. Yondaime noticed the gas smell and broke in to stop her. After that, he rushed to the elementary school to talk with her son directly.

Hiro-san told me a little theory:

“I think Iharagi Junko didn't know what her son had been doing at all, neither about how Hakamizaka had told him to take care of the flowers nor that he had accepted money from the junkies.”

I remembered my conversation with Iharagi Junko. She was unhinged when her son came and asked me if I was *'Shirou-san's friend'*, not because she was afraid that her own crimes were exposed, but because she panicked upon finding out for the first time that her son had been in contact with criminals. When Tomoki-kun said *'Mama scolded me a lot'*, it wasn't because she forbid him to speak for her own sake, but for her child's. After that,

Iharagi Junko searched his son's bedroom, probably found evidence of his son's interactions with Hakamizaka, Chigasawa, Oshima or the others, and upon conjecturing about her son's crimes, she felt cornered to the point of wanting to commit suicide with gas.

Poor Iharagi Junko was completely innocent after all. Her relationship with Hakamizaka was really just a florist-customer relationship.

But her very young child had became fascinated with Hakamizaka. No—It might be the opposite. Maybe Hakamizaka was the one fascinated with Tomoki-kun. Such a thought was frightening, but it did make sense.

“It seems Tomoki-kun ordered the fertilizers with her mother's password, so it would have probably been discovered even if we didn't do anything.”

“Chigasawa Teruhiko told him how to do it, right?”

“The order was placed under Chigasawa's bank account and with his mobile internet, but...” Hiro-san smiled ironically. “We can't know who told how to do it to whom. Maybe Tomoki-kun planned it all and asked Chigasawa for the things he needed. There are lots of scary children in this world, after all.”

But there's the possibility that it wasn't a sin. That little boy didn't understand death. He apparently thought that Hakamizaka's friends were patiently waiting under the drainage for the flowers to bloom. Right now, to what kind of institution have they transferred him? What kind of adults are surrounding him? What kind of words is he been showered with? I don't know.

“In the end, what was this all about?” Tetsu-senpai spat out by Hiro-san's side. “Toshi... And the other junkies... What the hell did they want to do? Were they waiting for the flowers to bloom? I just don't get it. Were they really waiting for the raw materials of their drug while munching on the rests they had saved up? That's just plain idiotic. Wasn't it obvious that they were going to die if they took that drug again? Who would make the new drug if all the members kicked the bucket together anyway?”

“Because they were stupid, that's why.” Hiro-san said indifferently. “They were drug addicts. You can't understand what went on inside their heads.”

“I'm not satisfied with that!”

Tetsu-senpai hit his own legs over and over again. I felt the same. The questions I couldn't turn into words were like bones stuck in my throat, obstructed forever.

*

February passed in the midst of a slippery numbness.

Hirasaka-gumi's black-shirted men constantly showed up at Ramen Hanamaru as customers. They would generally eat on credit, making Min-san mad every time. After talking about silly things with Ayaka(-neesan) and me, they would leave. They never said a word about Yondaime. I also felt constrained, so I didn't want to go to the office on the west gate side of the station.

Not even once did I visit Toshi-san at the hospital, either. Ayaka went many times and brought him ice cream from Hanamaru.

“He doesn't talk at all. Well, I don't say anything either.”, Ayaka said.

I didn't ask Ayaka anything, either. Does she still not remember anything about Toshi-san? About the drugs? About the poppy flowers she had grown? My head says that those things don't matter, but being by Ayaka's side meant being engulfed by that silence after all.

I didn't write a journal about the case. Before now, I had recorded every case I had taken part as an assistant detective, but with this case, not a single word about the things I had been involved in would come to mind to begin writing.

What was all this in the end? I thought as I looked up at the ceiling in front of my room's PC. I severed my ties with Yondaime, I dug up Ayaka's painful memories, Toshi-san was cornered on the abyss of the death for a second time, I was even suspended from school, and now that the case was finally over.... I didn't understand too much about it. There wasn't a detestable opponent. Shushuri was a seven-year-old child. It really looked like like the work of an angel.

What on earth was all this? I cursed at the cloudy sky from February slipping from the gaps between the curtains. What was the meaning of all this? Why did we have to get worn out getting involved in all this? I knew that I was thinking like a brat. That which we call *'meaning'* is something that takes form when we wish to convey something from someone and to someone. For that reason, most things in this world have no meaning.

*

I tried to call Yondaime many times, but I ended up shutting the cellphone closed each time.

I don't know what to say. I don't have any apologizing words, and I haven't done anything wrong in the first place. Yondaime hasn't done anything wrong, either. He's the head of Hirasaka-gumi, and I'm Ayaka's friend, so we would obviously make each other bleed if we collided.

No, it's not like Yondaime bled at all. I was the only one feeling sad. Even if we said we were sworn brothers, he won't feel troubled if I'm not around.

“Seeing you come here with the expression of a cat that got its tail burn bothers *me*.” Alice said with cold eyes on the bed while tilting her Dr Pepper can. “What's the matter? You can't possibly be expecting me to tell you *'My detective work has been in disuse, so go*

and bow your head to Yondaime', or are you?"

"Th-that's...."

That's kinda what I was thinking, actually. I've been seen through. I would have felt more at ease by persuading myself with something like 'They're Alice orders, so it can't be helped'.

"Really, there's a part of you that won't ever change."

The words Alice spoke while turning her gaze to the ceiling somehow sounded happier than usual. I tilted my head.

"In that case, you have no option but to wait."

I stared at Alice unusually kind expression.

"...For a miracle or something like that again?"

Alice's black hair swayed.

"It's not that. What you have to wait for is spring."

"...Spring?" What's up with that?

"I'm also waiting."

Alice's voice became distant, like the voice of a shepherd calling out for a lost sheep on a hill at sunset.

"Because, for me, the case is not over yet."

"N-not over?"

I placed my hands on the edge of the bed and leaned over to Alice. Her black hair scattered over the sheets and my hands.

"Why did Hakamizaka need Ayaka's greenhouse?"

Alice had once wondered that; a mystery that didn't look like one.

"All the answers should be clear now. Moreover, Ayaka probably doesn't know. It's not that she forgot, she didn't know from the start.

For that reason, we can only wait.”

*

And before long, spring finally arrived. The second spring since I came to this city.

The first Sunday of March after the end of the exams, I was called on the phone by Alice, so as soon as I finished my lunch, I took my bicycle and went to the Detective Agency. When I opened the door, I was dumbfounded.

“You're late! What took you so long? Wearing a kimono is really uncomfortable, so I want to finish this as soon as possible!”

Alice jumped down the bed in indignation. That day, she was wearing drop-dead gaudy white Japanese clothes, with a pattern of the mythical Phoenix bird. It suited her really well, and she looked like she was going to attend a photography event.

“...Eh, eehm? Why are you wearing a kimono?”

“Disregard that, let's go.”

Hugging her teddy bear, Alice forcefully pushed me back into the corridor, and we left the Detective Agency.

“Follow me.”, she said, walking in the opposite direction of the emergency stairs.

“Why are we going that way?”

“We're going to the rooftop.”

The rooftop?

I went to this building's rooftop just once. When we were going up the stairs that smelled like mold, the fluorescent lights were cut off,

and it became so dark that I almost couldn't see my own feet.

“Hey, why are we going to the rooftop? Are we going to pick strawberries again? But it's not the season yet, is it?”

Alice stopped in front of the rooftop's door and turned around. I have seen those eyes many times before. They showed an extremely serious spirit, which looked like a bubble that would burst any moment.

“I understood.”

“...Eh?”

“I understood everything.”

Holding on to the railing, I went up two steps from the landing and regained my breath.

Understood? Is that about the case being over?

“I understood why Hakamizaka used Ayaka's greenhouse.”

I gulped down my saliva that felt rough because of the dust, and waited for the detective's next words.

“Please, remember what Toshi told you. Hakamizaka asked him to go to M High School's greenhouse, fetch a report written by Ayaka, and pick up only the blue flowers.”

“Well... Yeah, he did say that.”

“Didn't you find it strange? Why pick up the blue flowers only?”

“Eh...?”

“The alkaloid from the poppies were harvested from their fruits, after the flowers withered. If they plucked the flowers as soon as they harvested, they couldn't get the ingredients for the narcotics.”

I gasped. It was indeed as she said. Then, what was the meaning behind what Toshi-san said?

“Then—Then why did he use Ayaka?”

“It was for Shushuri.”

I stared at Alice's face sunk in the very dim light.

“For Shushuri? For Tomoki-kun? What does Tomoki-kun have to do--”

“Shushuri wasn't the name of a person.”, Alice said. I was lost for words. When her hand turned the knob, streaks of light split the darkness. Bright rectangles spread, and Alice's outlines were swallowed by the backlighting. Receiving the fragrant wind in my face, I felt dizzy.

The instant I stepped on the rooftop, I held my breath.

The supernatant greenery all around me were pure white flowers, flowers, flowers--

Poppy flowers, growing thick on the soil of numerous planter cases aligned on the rooftop, looking up at the sun, blooming in profusion. Their fragrance filled my chest. Their petals were big and uneven, and what really stood out about those flowers was that said petals spread widely, dangling left and right.

Just like wings.

The wind boisterously blew on those wings. Light scattered around. In the middle of that dream-like scenery, Alice turned around with a smile.

“Shushuri,” Alice said. “was what Hakamizaka Shirou was looking for, and also what those foolish deceased were waiting for.”

The name of the flower. Alice's whispers slipped into the sounds of the wings and the wind.

Right, I remember seeing those slightly reddish leaves. These are the flowers that Tomoki-kun was growing in his school, although they still hadn't bloomed back then.

So, is this the reason? Is this why Ayaka once grew them in the greenhouse?

“This is yet another mutation of the mutated variety that Hakamizaka Shirou found in Iran.”

Alice said, looking at the dazzling white wrapping up the rooftop.

“Iharagi Tomoki probably made them bloom only once on his school's flowerbeds. That was when everything started. Hakamizaka and the others fixed their eyes on this whiteness. They wanted to make the scenery of these flowers bloom once again someday.”

The reason why Hakamizaka needed yet another greenhouse was to grow different flowers. A really simple reason. And the blue flowers that hadn't mutated were plucked off—Leaving only the white flowers growing on Ayaka's hands.

“They're not narcotics. Major investigated them at his university.” Alice muttered. “They're nothing but beautiful flowers.”

I nodded faintly. My heart was still imprisoned by the pure white light.

“Of course, this is mere speculation. Nobody knows what Hakamizaka was thinking when he was making this selective flower breeding anymore. There are no more words representing the deceased. They just drifted away aimlessly, with no one to accept them, leaving only this beauty behind.”

Is that a bad thing? The detective smiled.

How stupid. For the sake of this beauty, a great number of people died. The only reason they had to live was staring at this beautiful thing....

When I came to my senses, I asked Alice:

“But, what's with these flowers? Why are they here?”

“Hm? I asked Major to pick them up from that elementary school, and we let them bloom.”

At that moment, I heard sounds of footsteps going up the stairs behind me, and then the sound of the door opening.

“Alice! I called Fujishima-kun but--”

Ayaka's voice hit my back.

“Ahh, that's not fair! I wanted to see Fujishima-kun's surprised face!”

“It's okay, Narumi still probably has that stupid look on his face. We still have two whole hours. You can look at him as much as you like.”

“What do you think, Fujishima-kun!? Aren't they pretty!? This is a celebration for your promotion, Fujishima-kun! Congratulations on not repeating the year!”

“...Aah, yeah....”

I gazed at Ayaka who was now by my side, without knowing what face to make.

“Sorry I'm late. Actually, Alice and I wanted to get this started with some party crackers, like bam! But you see, I thought I should show the flowers to onii-chan before the blossoms scattered, so I dashed to the hospital!”

Onii-chan. That word echoed inside me, making me stiff.

So, did Ayaka remember Toshi-san? Her father? Even Hakamizaka Shirou and the drugs? And despite all that, she can still get close to poppy flowers?

Yet Ayaka just smiled, embarrassed.

“Ahh, but since I still can't remember onii-chan's name, it was really awkward. Is was... Toshio, right? Toshio, Toshio...”

A feeling like lukewarm salt water which I didn't know if it was weariness or relief spread inside my chest.

Even after all she has lost, she always lived with a smile. Even now.

“What did Toshi say when he saw Shushuri?”

“'He said *'What? Ain't it just a normal flower.'* How rude, right?”

Alice's shoulders shook as she laughed.

“Don't laugh. Sheesh... I didn't really understand all that you told me, Alice, but we went through lots of trouble for these flowers! They don't grow in Japan's soil at all, so he can't possibly understand how difficult it was to make them bloom.”

“That man has a poor sense of aesthetics. Look, in many ways he's similar to my assistant who's been spacing out for a while now.”

“Yeah? I don't think they're similar at all, though...”

At that casual statement, my consciousness finally returned to my body. My blood and my breathing were connected to my life once again.

Toshi-san and I were similar—Ayaka once said that, but this Ayaka right now thought differently. I have changed, and Ayaka has changed too. It's that simple. That feeling of emptiness we were smeared in would gradually walk away.

What Ayaka was growing weren't raw materials for narcotics. The sin that had crushed Ayaka wasn't a sin after all.

But, what about that? It doesn't matter. She's here, and all that matters is that she can smile. Isn't that right?

“What do you think, Fujishima-kun?”

“Ah, u-uhm...”

I inhaled the scent of the flowers, and ascertaining the fact that I was able to breath, I exhaled.

“These flowers sure have a strange shape.”

“You're not going to say something more touching-!?”

Tears appeared on Ayaka's eyes as she grabbed my arm, but when I apologized with a “S-sorry”, her tears quickly disappeared. Oh, crocodile tears.

“But it's frustrating, I thought everyone would cry. This will probably be the last time we see these flowers. I don't have all that money after all.”

That's right, money. Wasn't a lot of money necessary for the fertilizers and medicines?

“...How did you get the money?”

Ayaka was about to speak, but she noticed something and looked at the door over my shoulder, smiling.

“Our sponsor has come, too.”

I turned around.

Yondaime, who had pushed the door open with his knee and stepped on the rooftop, looked at me first and frowned, then he looked at Ayaka and Alice for two seconds with a sullen expression, and after that his eyes returned to me once again. I spontaneously stepped back. Wearing that same Chinese-style embroidered jacket he was wearing that day when I saw him for the first time outside the Agency, he looked scarier than ever. For some reason, he had a convenience store bag on his left hand.

“...Huh? Those flowers sure have a weird shape.” Yondaime said, looking at the fully bloomed Shushuris.

“Now these two *are* quite similar.” Ayaka whispered to Alice, earning a glare from Yondaime.

I raised my gaze to look at Yondaime's face, but I still didn't have the courage to meet his gaze.

He hasn't done anything wrong, and neither have I—No matter how many times I tried to persuade myself with that, it was useless.

“...Uhm, wh-why....?”

“Beats me. Those two called me.”

Surprised, I looked in Alice's direction. Not only Alice called him, Ayaka too?

“You know, Fujishima-kun...” Ayaka said, sweetly poking one of the poppy flowers with her finger. “I did some cruel things to Yondaime, actually. You didn't have to be angry, Fujishima-kun.”

“Wha--”

“He even payed a compensation for damages, and thus this matter ended.”

I looked at Yondaime's face once more. With a sullen expression on his face, he stared at the white angels surrounding us.

“And why did you make me buy this?”

Yondaime thew the convenience store bag in Alice's direction. Ayaka who was by her side caught it in hot haste.

“Don't throw carbonated drinks, you barbarian!”

In a huff, Alice took out dark red cans from the bag in Ayaka's hand and piled them up on the concrete floor. They were Dr Pepper cans, four of them.

Then, Alice looked at me. A burning sensation was prickling my chest. These two girls doing things to this extent made me feel miserable. Meeting with Yondaime now and being unable to look at him or say anything to him made me feel even more miserable, so I stared at the sweating Dr pepper cans and spoke:

“...The first time, we did the Hirasaka ceremony. This time... Can we do it in Alice's style?”

“Do what you want.”

We stood in a circle around the Dr Pepper cans. Yondaime and I

faced each other, with Ayaka as the witness on the left and Alice as the go-between on the right.

“I think I said the same thing last time, but I don't know any speech for sake ceremonies. Does anyone want to request a speech in particular?”

“Idiot. Just play house however you like. Sing a song of that bratty hard rock you're so fond of if you want.”

“Bratty? What's your problem with Mr. Big? In the first place, it's not just something I'm fond of--”

“Alice, if we don't hurry, they'll get lukewarm.”

Being admonished by Ayaka, Alice put a sulky look and took the first can.

Taking a deep breath, she began her chant:

“One for love.”

The first can was handed to Ayaka.

“One for truth.”

The next one was pushed into Yondaime's hands.

“One for you.”

I accepted the third one. This—What song is it again?

“One for me.”

Alice, who was holding the teddy bear, took the last can with her left hand.

“Where we once were divided, now we stand united.”

Alice's voice sounded like she was singing a chorus. Ahh, that's right, that song was written by Jon Bon Jovi a year after a plane

crashed into a building in New York. A song about new blood.

Alice pulled up the tab. The sound of the carbonated bubbles popping overlapped. The four blood-colored cans were raised and came in contact with each other. Alice's singing voice followed.

“—We stand as one.... *Undivided*.”

When I took the first sip, the bubbles burnt my mouth cavity. I didn't quite understand the taste. It was like small electric currents were running through my fingertips.

“...Tastes awful as usual.”

Yondaime spoke in a subdued voice, and Alice ruffled up her hair, exasperated.

“Not only you don't have a sense of aesthetics, you don't have a sense of taste either-!? I won't tolerate insults to Dr Pepper, if you think it tastes bad, file your reasons in writing, and it should rival the length of the Ramayana if you expect to win the argument-”

A strong wind suddenly blew on the rooftop, interrupting Alice's voice.

The first to notice was Ayaka, who turned around while muttering an “ah...”. Controlling her unraveled hair, Alice turned her back too, looking windward. Yondaime also looked up at the sky over my shoulder.

When I turned around, I saw the grains of pure white light scattering towards the clouded winter sky. The flower petals coiled in the wind, being released one by one, and flying away. The small wings flapped and fluttered, leaving an afterglow tail.

“...They're scattering.”

Ayaka's voice was blown by the wind together with the petals, disappearing into the sky. We bid farewell to fragments of light flying around in this city that no longer had angels. A beauty that

no one would receive. It couldn't have been other way.

While looking up at the petals growing wings and flying away into the deep blue sky, the words started taking form inside me, one by one. *It's over*, I thought. The case is over. And the winter of my seventeenth year has finally disappeared, welcoming the spring.

And of course, after my most tiresome case as an assistant detective, I waited for the brand new page of the notebook to open.

Afterword

It will soon be ten years since I worked at a dirty mahjong parlor in the Takada Riding Grounds. Both the staff and the regular customers had quite peculiar personalities, so it was an interesting work place that took three whole years worth of life experiences. I read lots of novels in that parlor, and I started writing and submitting novels there, too, because I had free time. That, and I was broke.

When the parlor got a new owner, we were all fired. What would have happened had I kept working there?--Even now, I often wonder that. I probably wouldn't have become a novelist. Anyway, it was a comfortable work place. Four days a week I worked for twelve whole hours, and the other three days I did nothing. Had I kept gambling, I would have probably ended up taken by the police while playing dice, praying at the morning sun in Totsuka's police station.

Lately, when someone asks me if I like mahjong, I reply with “I've been playing it my whole life”, which isn't really an answer. With the idea of inhaling second-hand smoke the whole night, every night, thanks to playing with people that aren't even my friends, I really don't know if I like mahjong or I hate it anymore. But it's true that I don't really feel like playing too much.

Well, as I had to write a short story and the deadline was drawing near, the only idea I had was “Yondaime's old man will appear”, I was in a quite bad situation, and then suddenly mahjong surfaced inside my head. The plot was put it order surprisingly fast. It was strange. Even if I lost the mood to play, the electrifying sensation of holding the tiles and being smeared on tobacco and nicotine probably won't disappear until the day I die.

Like that, this 8th volume includes the two short stories I wrote for Dengeki Bunko Magazine's 20th issue.

The second chapter could be called a short story too, since it

surprisingly ended up taking much more pages than expected.

By the way, if you watched the anime, you might have noticed a strange coincidences. The truth is that the second chapter of this volume was the original idea I had for the scenario of the first episode of the anime. In the end they almost didn't use my scenario except for the introduction of the case, and since they left the general outline behind, it ended up being a different scenario altogether. Since I have the mentality of a poor person, I included that original draft in volume 8. I think the ones who have the Blu Rays or the DVDs will find it interesting to compare the story with the anime. Yes, this is publicity. Ah, but sorry, when this volume comes out, the Blu Rays/DVDs won't be out yet. They come out in September the 28th.

I revived the idea that I had suggested to be put in the anime but wasn't used, and you could say that this whole volume consists on recycling, so I advanced from the planning stage to the manuscript quite smoothly (chuckle). As a result, there were lots of unworkable ideas that had to be completely renewed before the deadline, though, so I found out that I had counted the chickens before they hatched. My deepest apologies to whom it may concern.

I've been writing Kamisama no Memochou for quite some time now, so when I remember things from the past, I get filled with deep emotions. It's the series that continued for the longest time in my career, so when I write it, some strange vectors are born in the story. It's not like I think and then write, but the story itself asks me to write it; that kind of feeling.

Of course, that's just an illusion (if it wasn't, I'd patent it and sell it to people on the same business!), but it's still a special and pleasant feeling. I'd say it's close to the feeling you get with the Gestalt Collapse, in which you don't know if it feels good or if it's scary.

Anyway, this volume has that “I received a phone call, so I went to look for something I forgot” kind of feel. This must be the most confusing afterword I've ever written so far, but I can't really explain it better. I want to believe you'll understand when you read it. We novelists get our food on the table precisely because be write

things that one could only understand after reading 300 pages.

Speaking of which, I kinda think that life would be quite fascinating if I could bring food on the table just by writing four afterword pages. Just kinda, okay? I love writing a lot. Yes. Really.

Editor in charge Yuasa-sama, illustrator Kishida Mel-sama, and the whole staff and cast from the anime who rowed to widen the world of this series: I apologize for just sitting snugly on the back of the boat to gaze at the landscape. For giving me that place, I offer you all my warmest, warmest thanks.

September 2011, Sugii Hikaru.